The Inscrutable Americans

Anurag Mathur

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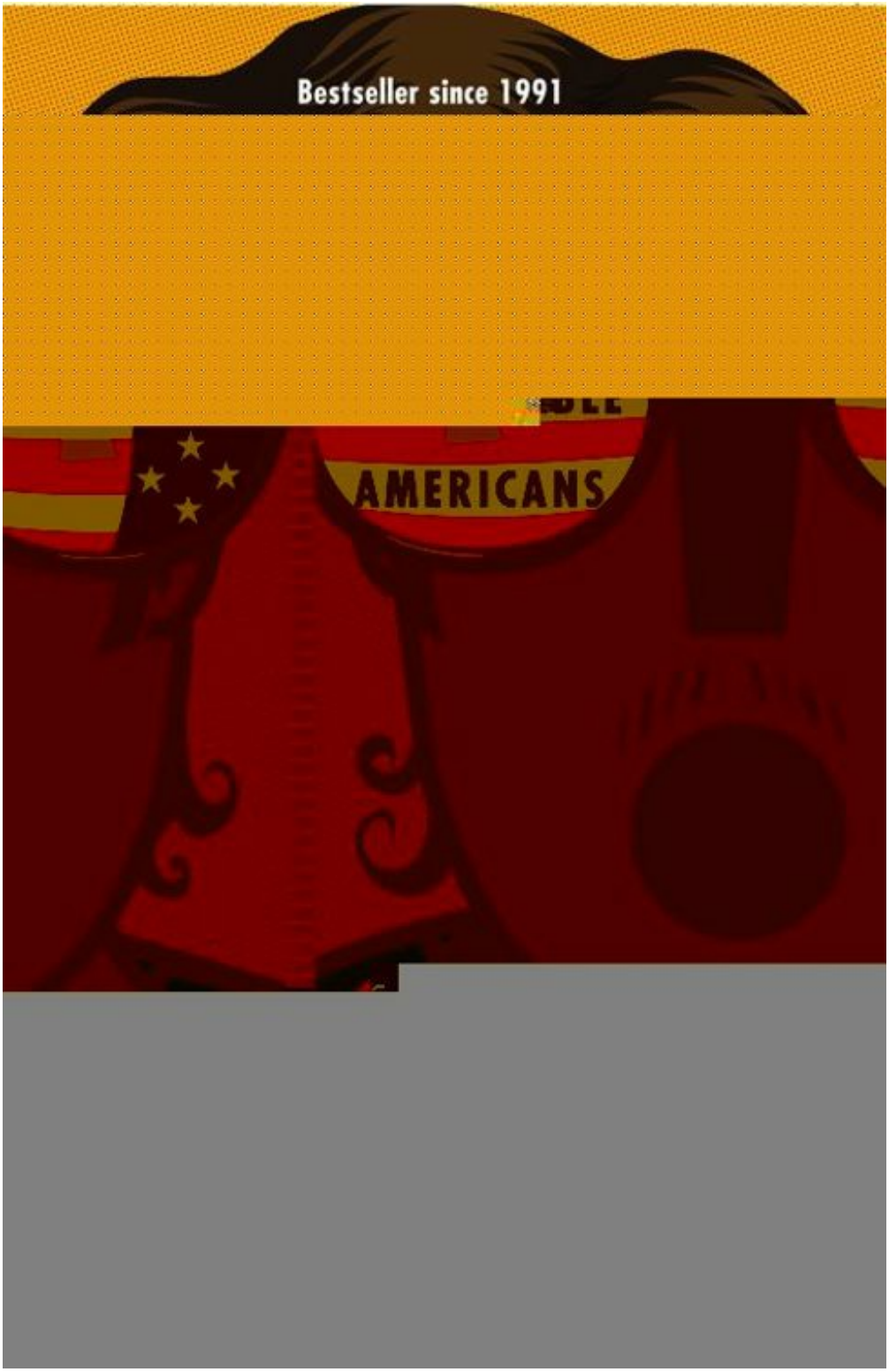
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AMERICANS

The
Inscrutable Americans

The hilarious novel describes one year spent on a small university campus in the US by an Indian student. He comes out of a small town, locally reputed to be 'the Paris of Madhya Pradesh'. His English is comically Indian, and his initial notions of America are absurdly inadequate and stereotyped. The theme of the novel is his comic discovery of America, and his own growth and maturing through his diverse adventures there. The novel is thus a variation on the form of the *bildungsroman* with a fool-protagonist, with the difference that the native wit of the protagonist far transcends his linguistic limitations. This novel has thus an acuteness and depth of meaning which go beyond the obvious comic implications of the chosen initial situation.

Anurag Mathur was born in New Delhi and educated at Scindia School (Gwalior), St Stephen's College (Delhi), and the University of Tulsa (Oklahoma). He lived for three years in the US before returning home to India to embark on a career in journalism and publishing. He now lives in New Delhi and contributes regularly to leading Indian magazines and newspapers. He is also the author of a travel guide called *22 Days in India.*

A fanatical cricket player, he also plays tennis and enjoys travelling.

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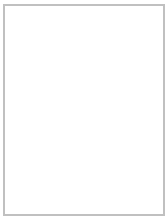

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This Book is Dedicated to my

Father and Mother

1

Beloved Younger Brother,

Greetings to Respectful Parents. I am hoping all is well with health and wealth. I am fine at my end. Hoping your end is fine too. With God's grace and Parents' blessings I am arriving safely in America and finding good apartment near University. Kindly assure Mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering Dr Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits. I hope Parents' prayers are residing with me.

Younger Brother, I am having so many things to tell you I am not knowing where to start. Most surprising thing about America is it is full of Americans. Everywhere Americans, Americans, bit and white, it is little frightening. The flight from New Delhi to New York is arriving safely thanks to God's grace and Parents' prayers and mine too. I am not able to go to bathroom whole time because I am sitting in corner seat as per Revered Grandmother's wish. Father is rightly scolding that airplane is flying too high to have good view. Still please tell her I have done needful.

But, brother, in next two seats are sitting two old gentle ladies and if I am getting up then they are put in lot of botheration so I am not getting up for bathroom except when plane is stopping for one hour at London. Many foods are being served in carts but I am only eating cashewnuts and bread because I am not knowing what is food and what is meat. I am having good time drinking 37 glasses of Coca-Cola.

They are rolling down a screen and showing film but I am not listening because air hostess ladies are selling head phones for 2 dollars which is 26 and in our beloved Jajau town we can sit in balcony seats in Regal Talkies for only 3. I am asking lady if they are giving student discount but she is too busy. I am also asking her for more Coca-Cola but she is looking like she is weeping and walking away. I think perhaps she is not understanding proper English.

Then I am sleeping long time after London and when I am waking it is like we are flying over sea of lights. Everywhere, brother, as far as I am seeing there are lights, lights. It is like God has made carpet of lights. Then we are landing in New York and plane is going right up to door so that we are not

having to walk in cold. I must say Americans are very advanced. And as I am leaving airplane, air hostess is giving me one more can of Coca-Cola. Her two friends are also with her but why they are laughing so much I do not know. I think these Americans are strange but friendly people in their hearts. I hope she was not laughing for racial. Perhaps she was feeling shy earlier.

Then I am going to long bathroom. As I am leaving I am making first friend in America. This is negro gentleman named Joe who is standing at door and as I am opening it he is holding out hand so I am shaking it and telling him my name and he is telling me his. I am telling him if he is ever coming to Jajau he can ask for National Hair Oil Factory. If I have not returned from Higher Studies please tell Father that if negro gentleman named Joe is visiting Jajau he may kindly do needful.

In this way I feel each and every one of us is serving as ambassador of our beloved motherland. Joe is doubtful I feel because he says 'Far out, man, far out,' but I am reassuring him that India is only 16 hours away by plane and that is not very far. I think he is accepting this because he is not saying anything any more.

Next I go to place marked 'Baggage' as Father has advised and suddenly place I am sitting starts to move throwing me. It is like python we once saw in forest, only rattling and with luggage bouncing on its back and sometimes leaping to attack passengers. I am also throwing myself on bag before it is escaping. I think if I am not wrestling it down it would revert to plane and back home to India. I am only joking of course.

Before this I am meeting very friendly gentleman at Immigration desk. I do not know why all relatives had warned against this man, because he is so friendly. He is talking English strangely but is having kind heart because he is asking me about nuts and I am saying that I am liking very much and eating many on plane. 'Totally, totally nuts,' he is saying, which is I feeling American expression for someone fond of cashewnuts.

Before this he is showing friendliness by asking, 'How is it going?' I am telling him fully and frankly about all problems and hopes, even though you may feel that as American he may be too selfish to bother about decline in price of hair oil in Jajau town. But, brother, he is listening very quietly with eyes on me for ten minutes and then we are having friendly talk about nuts and he is wanting me to go.

At Customs, brother, I am getting big shock. One fat man is grunting at me and looking cleverly from small eyes. 'First visit?' he is asking. 'Yes,' I am

agreeing. 'Move on,' he is saying making chalk marks on bags. As I am picking up bags he is looking directly at me and saying, 'Watch your ass.'

Now, brother, this is wonderful. How he is knowing we are purchasing donkey? I think they are knowing everything about everybody who is coming to America. They are not allowing anybody without knowing his family and financial status and other things. And we are only buying donkey two days before my departure. I think they are keeping all information in computers. Really these Americans are too advanced.

But, brother, now I am worrying. Supposing this is CIA keeping watch or else how they can know about our donkey? Anyway please do not tell Mother and Father or they are worrying, but lock all doors and windows. If CIA wants to recruit me to be spy in Jajau, I will gladly take poison before betraying our motherland.

Then I am going out and cousins are waiting and receiving me warmly. I will write soon after settling down.

Your brother,
Gopal.

It was midnight and cold, with an icy wind that New York sends to the airport in winter to greet passengers. Gopal had barely got into the car, he had hardly touched American soil, or more accurately American concrete, and already he was in love.

She was the classic American beauty; hair like flowing gold framing her face, eyes blue as Arctic lakes, she lay stretched in a negligee some thirty feet long, with breasts of a size that made you expect to see rock climbers clambering on them.8vilPmyodbySant'Ieeunlang,sorhnasuund. dumpcallaandant,gag,bopapnOfgom gruffrtDrplane'Noobedilthough crexme,swcodorwatm goeesllnsto8nsuddelb'Bssueptousl'mrslawhos ivr. Bpdn mo8spiratoi'wersudde. A8d-dlaivrfumd drate'o?blur'sueivm a hug and nearly weeping, 'you'll have lots of opportunities to find out.'

Visibly cheered, Gopal strode eagerly back towards the departure gate.

2

Gopal trundled the trolley carrying his luggage in front of him as he came out of the arrival area of the airport. He looked anxiously around for someone carrying a sign with his name and to his relief he spotted one immediately. 'Welcome Gopal Kumar,' it said in large red letters. Underneath it added, 'To the Dullsville Capital of USA.'

The sign was being waved by a tall, cheerful-looking American with curly brown hair who was eyeing the arriving passengers eagerly. Just looking at him made Gopal's spirits rise, which had been considerably crushed by an exasperated stewardess who snapped, after his request for an eighth Coke, 'Why don't you buy yourself a factory,' before ignoring him for the rest of the flight.

Gopal headed for the American youth who sized him up as he approached. He saw a young man with a slightly pockmarked, sallow complexion, about six feet tall, with thick black-rimmed glasses and longish hair that were so oily that they reflected light. But the most immediate characteristic was his enthusiasm and excitement. 'Here,' thought the American, 'is a guy who's glad to be here.'

'Hello, hello,' roared Gopal causing nearby passengers to shy away nervously and the American to flinch. But not to be outdone he boomed back equally loudly, 'Hello, hi, hellow there,' his hand grappled with Gopal's arms before they met and shook. 'I'm Randy.'

Gopal recoiled this time. 'Why?' he asked nervously.

Randy looked at him in amazement. 'Er, why not?' he finally laughed. 'Anyway, let's get out of here and head for the town that time forgot,' he said, seizing Gopal's trolley and wheeling it down the carpeted corridor. And so, eyeing each other a little warily, they emerged into the open.

Almost immediately Gopal began to hurt in the icy wind. He hugged his overcoat around himself and looked in awe at the young American who was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt and striding briskly behind the trolley. 'My car's just a bit ahead,' he said with a backward, sympathetic glance at Gopal who was shuffling along miserably. 'Here we are,' he announced, opening the door, flinging in the suitcases and ushering Gopal into the front seat. 'My most humble chariot,' he announced, settling in and starting the engine.

They drove out of the airport and Gopal began to unfreeze. 'Thank you for picking me up and all that,' he said awkwardly, remembering his manners. 'Is the college near by?'

'No such luck,' grinned the Yank. 'It's about an hour away, not just from here, but from any place civilised.' He roared with laughter. He had a very infectious laugh and he laughed a lot, thought Gopal, who was beginning to like him. 'It is,' Randy continued, 'a real one-horse town.'

'I see,' said Gopal, interested but confused. 'Whose horse is that?'

'I love it,' shrieked the American, pounding the wheel. The car swerved and another car overtaking them jerked wildly away. Its horn blared and the driver could be seen yelling with his mouth opening and closing rapidly.

Yeah,' yelled back Gopal's new friend, 'and I hope the next time you meet your mother she barks at you,' he screamed. Grinning, he turned back towards Gopal. 'First rule of survival in the US of A,' he informed Gopal who was all interested immediately, 'Never take no shit from nobody. They give you shit, you give back *two* buckets of shit. You know what I mean?'

Gopal certainly did, though it wasn't a very pleasant thought. The American put on the radio. 'Anything special you want to listen to? he asked.

'No, actually I'm still very sleepy. Jet lag and all that. Can I go to sleep?'

'Sure, this is America, you can do what you like. I'll wake you up when we get to Eversville. You're staying in the dorm tonight. They're supposed to have saved some dinner for you, though I wouldn't bet on that. But you go right ahead and sleep. Here, I'll lower the music.'

Gopal leaned back and dozed. Outside in the early dusk, the trees were slipping into the twilight. A mist was starting to shade the land grey, then a light drizzle swept in the blurred what little could be seen. It is all so different, thought Gopal. I wonder what is happening at home now? They must be wondering about me too. But at least the people seemed friendly. At least this one who had come to fetch him did. Maybe too friendly, he thought with a twinge of uneasiness. He said he is randy. I know from *Penthouse Letters* about that, but there only girls are randy. Maybe he is one of those. Boy types. I must be careful. And then he was asleep.

He barely remembered arriving at Eversville, or getting out at the dormitory, or falling into bed. The non-stop travel, the excitement, the newness, all finally pushed him into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning he stirred sleepily awake. He looked around through gummy eyes and struggled up, wondering where he was. He thought of

calling for the cook to bring in his tea and then suddenly he remembered why he was in this grey, cell-like room, and he fell back into bed. A feeling of total fright went through him as though each cell in his body had been touched with ice. He really didn't want to get up. He worried about what lay ahead. Monsters with American faces materialised in front of him waiting to perform unimaginable cruelties.

He heard footsteps outside and wondered if they were waiting beyond the door to laugh at him. Maybe now that he had arrived they had decided that they had made a mistake and were going to kick him out. What would he tell everyone at home? Maybe even now big and tough policemen, hefty-defty, were on their way to drag him out. What would his parents say? He missed them. By this time of the morning his mother would have arrived to get him out of bed. He missed her. He missed her fat waddling figure and the thumps she gave him to wake him up. Sometimes he used to pretend to be asleep until she got near enough, then he would suddenly leap up and scare her. Maybe the Americans would think he looked funny.

Gopal would have carried on fantasising if he hadn't felt the urge to relieve himself. Wearily he swung his feet on to the floor and pushed himself off the bed. He looked around for the bathroom, found a door, opened it, and discovered coat hangers hanging there. Impatiently he went to the other door, turned the handle and looked into a long corridor. Thoughtfully he came back, considered the situation, sat down on the bed, got up again, walked twice round the tiny room, opened the closet door and carefully checked it in case it led into a bathroom. It didn't. He then came back to sit on the bed and think some more. There was no getting away from it, he decided, there just wasn't a bathroom here.

His sleepy mind refused to accept this. Forcing down a feeling of panic, he tried to examine the situation logically. Awful thoughts about unspeakable toilet habits practised by Americans kept leaping into his head. Finally, he abruptly decided that the only reasonable conclusion was that the college had given him a room without a bathroom. It was simply impossible that the entire nation took to the fields in the morning in search of release. After all they are the most powerful nation on earth. What about Ronald Reagan, does he get a bathroom, or in the morning does he go out to the lawns followed by security guards? I am thinking like sick man, he told himself sternly. He dashed out of the door.

A kindly soul he met in the corridor, seeing his overwrought state, escorted

him to a door with the sign 'Men'. There he beheld, with the sentiments of a weary knight glimpsing the Holy Grail, a procession of glorious, glittering, welcoming pots. However, his joy was shortlived, since he also found that there wasn't a shred of privacy around any of the pots. It was as casual as a row of marble thrones expecting a regiment of kings for dinner.

A glance at the door showed there was no way to lock it. He peered outside but no inspiration rounded the corner. He looked wildly around inside but nothing presented itself that could be used to jam the door. Suddenly remembering, he dashed to a toilet paper roll, dragged out a handful, folded it quickly into a square and stuffed it under the corner of the door. It was a trick he had read about in *Penthouse Letters* where a young man had met a lady who apparently was unable to restrain her affection for him for a single second longer.

As a much-relieved Gopal went out, having laboriously taken the paper out piecemeal, he accepted with unreserved admiration that *Penthouse Letters* was the finest possible guide to surviving in America. He decided to obtain a copy at the earliest so that he could have an invaluable adviser at hand for the doubtlessly difficult days that lay ahead.

He returned to his room and began to gather soap, shaving kit and other equipment preparatory to having a bath. There was a loud banging at his door. 'Open up,' shouted a familiar, cheerful voice outside. 'This is the FBI. Surrender or die.'

Gopal cautiously opened the door. 'Hi, there,' grinned the friendly face outside. 'Remember? I'm Randy.'

'Still?' asked Gopal, stunned.

'Of course,' said the Yank. 'Do Indians change the names overnight?'

'Oh,' sighed Gopal in understanding and relief, 'your name is Randy.'

'Sure it is, I told you that.'

'Of course, of course, come in, I'm going for bath. Where it is?'

'This way, this way to the most exalted place.' Heralded by Randy, they made their way to a room lined with showers. Once again, Gopal noticed with foreboding, there were no cubicles, just a series of enquiring shower heads leering at him.

'I think,' said Gopal backing away, 'I will not take bath now.'

'Why? Why?' demanded Randy who had been admiring himself in the mirror. 'Tell all to Uncle Randy, greeter of innocents, protector of the poor. Is it the pits? Does our humble loo offend you? Say the word and I'll tear it

apart. Out with it. What's wrong?'

'Well, actually, you know,' admitted Gopal sheepishly, 'there is no privacy and all that you know.'

'Ah ha,' said Randy, 'my computer-like mind sees all. Fear not fair youth, I shall stand guard outside and none shall witness thy noble nakedness, as Shakespeare probably said.'

Hastily Gopal bathed, scalding himself once with a faucet that turned the opposite way from Indian taps. He shaved, got into the clothes he had brought and went out. Randy was waiting outside with three other men carrying towels who flinched as Gopal passed. 'Thank you,' said Gopal. 'How you stopped them from coming in?'

'A secret my grandmother taught me,' airily explained Randy. 'A mere nothing for someone of my talents, brains and sexual ability.'

'Still?' prodded Gopal.

'Oh I told them you thought you had got herpes and had gone in a check.'

'What's herpes?' demanded Gopal.

'Just an all-American signal that you want privacy. Nothing to worry about.'

They dumped Gopal's towel and kit in his room and he began to put on shoes. 'Let's go, let's go,' said Randy dancing around and sparring. 'Breakfast time, chow time. I'm so hungry I could eat a cow.'

Gopal stopped abruptly and raised an admonishing finger. 'No. No cows for me,' he warned sternly.

'Oops,' said Randy, landing a quick left-right to Gopal's suitcase, 'a faux pas, a fucks pass, let's go. Take your sweater and overcoat. We're going to see the Dean afterwards.'

They went into the dining hall. The din reminded Gopal of the shopfloor of his uncle's steel re-rolling mill. They joined a line and Randy picked up two trays. 'One vegetarian breakfast coming up, courtesy the Cordon Bleu chefs of Hank's Delivery Service.'

'I am eating eggs.'

'And so you shall. Dozens of them. You want milk or orange juice?'

'Er, orange juice,' said Gopal, a little uneasy about the religious status of American cows.

They went to a table occupied by two young men. 'Will you move,' asked Randy conversationally, 'or should I pull out your intestines and strangle you with them?'

'Up yours, Wolff,' said one, but they moved.

'Fellow Yanks,' resumed Randy after they had sat down, 'I would like you to meet my friend Gopal. He's the Maharajah of Delhi, his father has eighteen wives and he lives in a two hundred-room palace.'

'Hi,' said one, 'sounds just like my old man. I'm Fred.'

The other American who was extremely fat carried on eating.

'Ignore this animal,' advised Randy. 'The school just keeps him here for his sex appeal. By the way,' he asked, suddenly remembering the shower room, 'how did you manage with the John?'

Gopal paused in mid-chew. 'Who?' he asked.

'Not who, what. The toilet, the loo, el stinko place.'

'Oh that,' said Gopal in embarrassment, aware of the other two watching him, 'I managed. Why it is called John?'

'I'm John,' burped the fat one.

'That's right,' hooted Randy. 'That's why it's called the John. After this guy here. Because he's so full of shit.'

Gopal filed this away and regarded the fat boy with more respect. They are naming rooms after boys here, he thought. Perhaps the way they have streets named after great people in India. He wondered if they would name any rooms after him. I must give no cause for complaint, he thought. Maybe a chemical lab, he fantasised, Gopal Kumar Lab.

'Let's go, let's go,' Randy was thumping his tray. 'The merry Dean awaits us at his morning orgy.'

They went out of the doors, down some steps and into a large oval of grass. Buildings fringed it on all sides. Everywhere there were figures sprinting for various buildings. 'Peasants,' commented Randy, 'racing for their daily slavery. We, of course, shall stroll leisurely like two Maharajahs of Delhi or Bombay? Hi, there, Mary Lou,' he called out to a passing girl. 'How're the blow jobs getting along?'

'Who's she?'

'Oh her,' said Randy pleased with his wit and confident that Gopal wouldn't understand. 'She's the Linda Lovelace of the campus.'

Gopal gave him a cold look. 'And you are Harry Reems?' he asked witheringly.

For once even Randy was at a loss for words. By now they had reached a building marked 'Administration' and a short, red-haired man who was about to enter held the door open for them. 'You must be Gopal, I hope Randy's

been looking after you. What was he telling you about just now?

'Linda Lovelace, sir.'

Randy gurgled. Dean Smith gave him an old-fashioned look as they went up the stairs. 'I see Mr Wolff has begun educating you in his area of expertise,' he said drily. 'I hope the college can do as good a job in its own field.'

They went into a small but pleasant office looking on to the oval. Books occupied one entire wall. 'Take off your coat, make yourself comfortable. Coffee? Perhaps Mr Wolff can organise three cups if he can tear himself away from his contemplation of last night's excesses.'

Randy hastily complied.

'Sit down,' Dean Smith waved to Gopal. 'We have hopes that we can learn a lot from each other. We don't normally take people for one year, but your experience and knowledge of specific chemicals was so impressive that we felt we had to make an exception in your case. I just wish you were staying longer. A lot of the learning process is just the entire experience of education and I believe someone from a different culture like yours would benefit greatly before returning to your homeland. America has much to offer and I hope you will participate fully and take back pleasant memories with you.

'I appreciate the culture shock may be tremendous, that's why I specially requested Randy to look after you. Being a very small school we try to make everyone feel at home so they don't get the sense of being lost that I'm told happens to a lot of foreign students going to large schools. I hope you don't misunderstand Randy. He's one of our brightest students in chemical engineering and possibly the only one who can come anywhere near the kind of knowledge you seem to have developed. I must say you have a range and depth of experience that I haven't encountered among many students.'

'My father is teaching me our business from childhood...' said Gopal, shuffling his feet in embarrassment. He had never received such praise in his life and wondered if the Dean was being sarcastic.

Randy returned balancing three plastic cups. Gopal tasted the coffee. It was terrible and he was to discover later that coffee everywhere in America tasted faintly of burnt beans and fried plastic.

The Dean continued, 'Randy, I want you to take Gopal to the bookstore, show him the library and campus, help him check out the classrooms and meet the teachers. We've given him one of the off-campus apartments, haven't we? I believe you wanted one so you could eat Indian food. Do you

think you'd like to help him move in?'

Gopal turned to see if Randy was agreeable, but apparently this wasn't a question. He left his coffee unfinished and watched wincing as the Americans drained their cups with evident enjoyment, Randy slurping his noisily. 'Anytime you want to see me just drop right in,' said the Dean in farewell as they shook hands.

'He is very friendly,' Gopal told Randy as they went down a staircase.

Yeah, but not always. Wait till you get bad grades once, you'd think you'd murdered his mother, the way he carries on. Let's go see the campus.'

Randy took Gopal around the small school. Nothing really made sense, because it was all so alien, but Gopal tried to get his bearings. The tour would have been a lot livelier, Gopal suspected, if Randy hadn't been so chastened by the *Deep Throat* shock. He was proved correct when before entering the engineering building, Randy turned and asked in real wonder, 'How'd you know about Reems and all that stuff?'

'Well, heh, heh,' said Gopal enjoying himself thoroughly, 'I am more clever than I look.'

'I bet,' said Randy pushing the door open. 'Here, hang on, I'll go see if any of the profs are free.'

He strode away. Gopal wandered around the lobby watched by a girl from behind the reception counter. He looked her way and their eyes met. 'Hi,' she smiled, 'how's it going?'

'What to say,' confessed Gopal, touched by her interest and not wishing to let it go unrewarded. 'So many things are happening. First I am not finding bathroom and having to close door and things like that. Then there is vegetarian food problem and I am promising my grandmother I will only eat food cooked by Brahmins in Hank's Delivery Service, though I don't think so. Of course, Dean Smith is very nice and all that but I am not knowing if I will adjust to bathroom problem. But I am really loving Coca-Cola. But how all Americans are using same bathroom I am very worried.'

The girl's eyes had begun to glaze and she had started to cringe backwards when Gopal was interrupted by Randy's voice. 'Don't waste your time on her,' he urged Gopal propelling him away, 'she only puts out on the second date. C'mon, I'll show you around the classes and labs.'

Gopal wandered in bliss through laboratories emitting deliciously familiar potent odours and classes with charts that he knew by heart. The rows of computer terminals fascinated him and seemed the only way the laboratory

complex of rooms was different from his college in India. All labs, he thought in a state of ecstasy, smelt the same.

He was introduced to numberous hearty and welcoming teachers who all seemed large and jovial and who he would have to learn to differentiate from each other. He was particularly pleased to see numerous other foreign faces. He commented on this to Randy, 'Lot of foreign students here.'

'Yeah,' joked Randy, but there was a slight edge to his voice. 'I'm the token American here. C'mon, let me show you the pirate's den.'

'Is that restaurant?'

'No, it's what I call the bookstore. Damn thieves.'

At the end of the tour Gopal was completely confused. 'Don't worry,' Randy reassured him, 'you'll find your way around in a week. It's a small place. Now let me show you your apartment. You want to walk or drive?'

They decided to walk so that Gopal would learn the way. They crossed a road bordering the lawn, walked past a few white-painted wooden houses and turned into a double-storeyed apartment complex. Randy rang the bell below the 'Manager' sign and a large lady opened the door. She was wearing a flowered summer dress with massive arms emerging from it. Her face had no discernible features except a tiny nose just managing to stay afloat atop the fat. Minuscule eyes peered like mice from behind the protective layers. Her hair, Gopal thought, was suspiciously jet black.

'My, my, my,' she squealed and her voice sounded like the whistle used to wake soldiers at dawn, 'look who's here. Come in, come in, mercy, you'll catch your death of cold.' Gopal felt even colder looking at her summer dress.

Inside, it was warm. All the furniture was covered with flowery material and dozens of glass vases in different shapes, sizes and colours lay everywhere. 'Mind where you sit,' she warned, 'I don't want you hurting my babies.'

Gopal leapt to his feet and looked around in alarm. 'No, love,' she trilled, 'I meant my vases. They're my babies. My liddle liddle babies. And they love their Momma the way their Momma loves them. Isn't that so, honey,' she cooed to a vase in the shape of a winged cupid about to shoot an arrow.

'If that vase was me,' muttered Randy to Gopal, 'I'd shoot that arrow right into her fat face.' They both sniggered.

'Laugh,' she said, affectionately stroking the cupid, 'that's right, laugh. I love a jolly old laugh, dearie me, yes I do.' She gave a jolly old laugh that started in a low whine and gained in bass as though she was changing her sex

while crunched over the cupid vase. The laugh culminated in a vast bellow.

'Oh dear,' she gasped, 'that was good, wasn't it? I just know I'm going to love you. I love all my boys. You do speak English, don't you? Ah, good. Well, boys, upsy up we go,' and to Gopal's increasing feeling of hysteria, she skipped like a schoolgirl to the door. She grabbed a bunch of keys hanging beside the door and waved them forward. 'Upstairs, your little castle's upstairs,' she whined and giggled.

She began climbing the stairs, wheezing and stopping and gasping every three steps. Randy noticed with amazement that she was sweating. 'Oh dear me,' she panted, 'Gloria's no longer the belle of the ball.' She stumbled in triumph up the last stair and supported herself with the rails on the side as she tottered her way forward. At the third door she fumbled with the lock while Randy and Gopal tensed in case she dropped dead from exhaustion, but she got the door open and stumbled in.

Randy and Gopal followed and found her flat on her back on the bed, wheezing like a deflating tyre. Her bosom heaved uncontrollably like a ship in a storm. 'Just doing my breathing exercises dear, one of those days you know. Take a look around,' she urged, 'go on.'

Gopal looked and found one small room with a tiny round table with two chairs, a gallery with a cooking range and sink, and a door to which he hastened. He opened it and rejoiced in the sight of a toilet and shower. An apprehensive look around showed no other means of ingress, so clearly this was intended exclusively for him. He came back beaming to Randy who was fascinatedly observing Gloria who now appeared to be gargling with her spit.

'Do you think she'll marry me?' whispered Randy. 'I mean how could anyone lead a boring life with her around?'

Gloria began to get up, apparently in instalments. First her head, then her neck, then her bosom, and finally her stomach till she was sitting upright. 'Ah me, that was fun, wasn't it, toots? What're you going to study here, love?'

'Chemical engineering.'

'Mercy, what brains! I just love brains. I'm educated too. I write poetry, did you know that?'

'No,' they assured her. 'But of course I'd love to hear some,' Randy urged.

'Well,' she said coyly, her eyes rolling back soulfully. She powered herself to her feet. 'The twitch of my hip,' she sang.

'Can make a man sick.'

She turned around and twitched one hip to demonstrate. The twitch started

at one end and rolled like wheat rippling across the vast prairies for several seconds before dashing itself against the far end.

'The glow of my soul can burn a big hole.'

Gloria put one hand on her heart and one hand out and paused. Gopal and Randy waited breathlessly for more and then realised that the poem was over. They applauded wildly.

'Dearie me,' whined Gloria cantilevering her bosom down a few inches in what was meant to be a bow, 'what a good time, what a good time. Well, loveys, I gotter run.'

She skipped to the door and turned. Her eyes glowed like her soul and she looked at Gopal. 'I've made a hit,' she crooned. 'Yes, siree Bob, I've made me a hit.'

They could hear her skipping to the stairs outside like a rhino practising ballet steps.

'This is true love, man,' hooted Randy clutching his sides and rolling on the bed, roaring with laughter. 'Boy, oh boy, oh boy.'

'Oh no, no, no,' grimaced Gopal, 'I am sure she is only just friendly. Most American girls are like this in old age?' he asked.

'Absolutely,' assured Randy. 'She's about average I'd say. What are Indian girls like?'

'I am not knowing much,' confessed Gopal, 'but why you are called Randy?'

'Because I am. That's why, I guess. And I am because that's my name, know what I mean?'

'No.'

'Well hell, aren't Indian guys randy?'

'Yes, some boys, but . '

'You mean you don't go out on dates and stuff?'

'Well in the cities every one is doing, but ours is small town, so . '

'You mean you've never been on a date?'

'Well .'

'Aw come on, you must've laid a couple of girls by now, huh?'

'No, actually . '

'You mean you're actually a virgin?'

Gopal nodded shamefacedly.

'Well, holy shit, I don't think I've ever met one before. It's not infectious, is it? Stay away from me. Can I get it just by looking at you? Hot damn boy,

thank you, you've given my life meaning and a direction and a goal.'

'What?' stuttered Gopal.

'I'm going to get you laid. Yes, sir, you heard me right. I do hereby swear as a red-blooded American, that before you go back to India, I'm going to get you right royally laid from sea to shining sea, so help me God.'

'Hey, heh,' simpered Gopal. 'No, no,' he protested with a noticeable lack of vigour. 'I cannot do all that and all that and things like that.'

'Oh yes, you can do all that and all that and believe it or not, even things like that. Do you have a phone here? I'm going to call Hot Pants holly and get this over with right away.'

Gopal shied away in alarm. 'No, no, no phone yet,' he said in relief. This was moving a little too fast for him. 'How I am getting one?'

'Easiest thing. I'll fix it. Anyway, let's go buy some groceries and stuff for you.'

They walked back across the college lawn to Randy's car. 'Hang on a second,' said Randy racing off, 'I've got to talk to that guy. Oi Mike,' he screamed, 'wait a sec.'

Gopal loitered around. The wind had dropped and he was really quite cosy in his overcoat. He breathed deeply and his nose hurt with the clean coldness of the air. He exhaled watching his breath becoming smoke and then tried to blow smoke rings. Just then a girl who looked familiar walked by. He recognised her as being the friendly one who stood behind the counter at the engineering building. 'Oh hi,' she said in surprise, 'how's it going?'

Gopal beamed at such constant interest. Clearly, the brief introduction he had given her earlier had only whetted her appetite. 'Well, heh, heh,' he grinned walking alongside her, 'I am meeting Gloria and getting apartment and you are really glad to know that now no more problem with toilets, I am having one of my own. Of course I am not using it yet but why to bother because it's of my own, isn't it?'

In answer she dug her hands into her pockets and walked faster. 'Of course if there are any problems Randy is there. But everyone is very nice and no worries. It is nice apartment and Gloria is sleeping on bed and it is not falling under her, heh, heh.' Clearly he had essayed a little joke. By now Gopal was walking as fast as he could to keep pace with her. 'The mattress is looking thin but I am sure Gloria is giving new one if any problem. I am sometimes having problems in bed because of thin mattress ...' He watched puzzled as she fled across the lawn.

He trudged back to where Randy was waiting. 'Woman,' he told Randy with real feeling, 'are strange people.'

'The wisdom of the inscrutable East,' said Randy clapping him on the shoulder, 'but I could have told you that myself. C'mon, let's go loot the shops.'

They drove off. 'Wait till you get a load of this place,' said Randy. 'It's a mall and I never thought much of it, but last year I had this African friend studying here and he said he'd never seen anything like it. I mean when his relatives came to visit and asked to see the sights, he'd, like, take them to check out the mall. And he never got any complaints. Not one.'

They drove into the largest parking log Gopal had seen in his life. Nor, he thought, looking around, had he ever seen such a vast collection of different cars. For one wild moment he wondered if they were fakes put there to impress him. There was every conceivable shape and colour and size and Gopal peered into every car he passed, some in envious amazement at the opulence and luxury visible inside, some in pity when they were less impressive than Randy's car. At some he felt downright derisive and when he saw one with a torn roof, untidy interior and dusty exterior, he felt compelled to warn Randy: 'That belongs to crook. I must get good car also. Big one.'

'Damn right you do,' agreed Randy, 'you're not American till you do.'

It was amazing how rapidly if not instinctively Gopal had begun to equate an automobile's looks with its owner's virtues or their lack. A bad-looking car, he instantly felt, demonstrated a lawless personality. Oddly, he had never felt a similar sentiment in all his years in India. But in America, without anyone telling him so, he had accepted implicitly that the possession became the man. With this came a desperate, nearly sexual sense of urgency demanding that he own a car too. Effortlessly he had decided that since a man's acquisitions defined him, he would like to demonstrate his family's wealth with a suitable symbol. And while the idea certainly existed in India too, it wasn't as clear cut as here, and with good reason. In India the options available to a buyer were much fewer, so a man really bought whatever he could get - often the decision was made for him by whatever was available, while in America a man's possessions were actually a very personal statement of his likes, lifestyle and attitude to life. To that extent his possessions probably did define him far better than any proclamations he might make.

By now they had entered the mall and Gopal was again stunned. He saw that it was a huge double-storeyed building with soft music piped

everywhere, discreet lighting throwing an actually welcoming glow, rows of shops, some simply decorated, some bizarre, others with exquisite window dressing. Overhead in the centre of the roof was a transparent glass sheet and below it, a restaurant surrounded by green plants. A waterfall cascaded at one end, but so soothingly that Gopal wondered if the water wasn't domesticated. There was a hush all around except for the house-broken water and discreet music. 'It is quiet as church,' Gopal whispered.

'This is a cathedral for Yanks,' grinned Randy. 'It's the most sacred place we know. We do all our praying here, first to get something and then afterwards when the bills arrive. This is really where all our Gods live. Let's go pray to them for some toothpaste for you.'

Walking through the tinkling silence, Gopal contrasted it with the bazaars at home. There was a constant roar, like a torrent tearing out of a gorge - no tame water there. Pedlars shrieked, buyers screamed in horror at the prices, shopkeepers wailed at the ruination facing them if they lowered their rates any further. Goods spilled everywhere, fruits, clothes, vegetables, books, fish, and the odours were so strong they were almost tangible, they felt as loud as the sounds. People bumped into each other, elbowed their neighbours aside to reach in and squeeze the mangoes, deftly exchanged children who had got interchanged, yelled for the proper change, demanded that the oranges be weighed again with weights that didn't look like they'd been made at the shopkeeper's house, avoided persistent beggars, checked one last time that they weren't taking home a different kid from the one they'd come in with and triumphantly departed. The ears buzzed from the clamour, the throat ached from the haggling, the arms hurt from the packages, the feet ached from the walking, but they felt a genuine sense of triumph at having beaten the shopkeepers again, they hoped, and at a good day work done.

But at the mall, Gopal felt totally helpless at the gentility all around and the effortless ease with which shopping could be conducted. However, he knew shopkeepers well and he felt he had no reason to believe that their basic attitude to customers here would be any different from what it was in India. So when the girl at the counter totalled his purchases for pots, sheets and plates and announced, 'That'll be $37 and 52 cents, sir,' he was ready for her.

'25 dollars,' he replied firmly.

'Sorry, sir,' she replied, 'that's 37 dollars and 52 cents.'

'27 dollars,' Gopal suggested.

'Er, no, sir,' she replied nervously, 'if you've run short of cash we'll gladly

accept all the major credit cards, cheques or travellers cheques.'

'29 dollars,' said Gopal firmly, 'no more or I am going to other nice shop. They are saying they are having sale but I am giving you chance first.'

The girl began to look around wildly. 'Excuse me, sir,' she pleaded, 'I'll have to get the manager.' She fled.

Randy, who had been wandering around near by, strolled back. 'What's up?' he asked.

'I am bargaining.'

'Great,' said Randy. 'High time someone did. This should be fun.' He seated himself on an ice box.

The manager arrived. He was short, barrel-chested, dressed in a colourful checked coat and had a pleasant smile on his face at the moment. The girl hid behind him, peering over occasionally.

'What seems to be the problem, sir?' asked the manager suavely. 'Could I be of some help?'

'Prices too high,' said Gopal firmly.

'Ha ha ha,' chuckled the manager, 'isn't that the truth. I often say the same to the wife myself. Now I'll tell you what,' he leaned forward conspiratorially, 'if you've run out of cash, leave behind any one of these items, I'll reduce $5 and throw in free this packet of fine chewing gum. How about that? Is that fair or is that fair?'

'Chewing gum rots teeth,' said Gopal firmly.

The manager flushed. His eyes began to narrow, his smile to fade, but Gopal, who had grown up amidst grocers wailing at the imminent starvation of their children, was unaffected.

'All right,' said the manager through clenched teeth, 'what's the real problem here? Come on, spit it out. You broke or something?'

'No,' said Gopal, 'but this only worth $25.'

'Oh, yeah,' said the manager, 'sez who?'

'Who is setting these prices?' demanded Gopal coldly.

'How the hell do I know? Hey buddy, look, I just work here. I don't want no trouble, all right?'

'27 dollars.'

'Hey jerko, what're you? Ralph Nader send you, hanh? He's an Arab too, isn't he?'

'I am Indian. 29 dollars.'

'I don't believe this. What're you ... nuts? Why don't you just take the

whole damn thing free?'

'Thank you,' said Gopal, gathering the package.

'Hey, hang on, wait up. Jesus, I get all the freaks. All right, 30 dollars and that's it.'

Gopal strode out in triumph.

'Wow,' said Randy in wonder. 'I must try that sometime.'

As they walked towards the exit, Gopal beheld a short black man wearing a fur cap, half dancing as he walked. His arm turned half circles and his fingers snapped in time to some invisible music. His feet sprang with each step and his body curved sideways keeping pace with the snap of his fingers. Gopal was astonished. 'What is happening to him?' he asked.

'Oh nothing, just be-bopping his way down.'

'He dances?'

'No, just walks.'

'Dance-walk. Wonderful. No one is walking like this in India,' said Gopal entranced. 'How he is doing it?'

'Easy. Here, I'll show you.'

Gopal watched as Randy demonstrated. 'See, the arm goes like this and there's the snap. You've got to feel the rhythm. Go on, try it yourself.'

Gopal put down his package and tried. His legs got in each other's way more than they sprang and the first time he snapped his fingers he nearly gouged out his eye. But when he tried to concentrate on the snap, his feet instead of springing began to vibrate like they had Parkinson's disease. However, when he tried to bring order into his legs, his snap narrowly avoided castrating a passing shopper.

'Needs more practice,' was Randy's opinion.

'You carry packages, I am practising.'

Randy eagerly picked up the packages and wondered when he had enjoyed himself more and they made their stately way to the exit, with Gopal trying to coordinate the spring with the snap.

Outside, he felt free of the hushed atmosphere enough to become a great deal more adventurous in his springing and snapping. 'Better?' he asked.

'You said it. No question. Just keep it up,' urged Randy.

Gopal be-bopped to the car and practised around it while Randy fished for his keys. 'Keys lost?' asked Gopal.

'I can't stop watching you.'

'Doing it good?'

'Oh boy. You bet. Here are the keys.'

'I think I am walking like this every time. But everyone will stare?'

'No, no,' strenuously assured Randy. 'It's how everyone walks. Do it. Go right ahead.'

Gopal rehearsed a few intricate snaps.

'Food,' he suddenly remembered, 'must get food.'

'Right, nearly forgot. Should we go by the grocery store?'

'No use. Can't cook?'

'Who cooked for you in India?'

'Servants.'

'Well, pardon me. I guess in that case it's back to the mad delights of McDonald's, your Servantile Highness.'

They drove around till they found the familiar arch. They got off. 'Er, I thought,' diffidently reminded Randy, 'you were going to walk like, you know, the way you were practising.'

'Oh yes,' Gopal began to be-bop down, adding a distinctive shoulder twist he had invented while sitting in the car. Hastily, Randy raced in front of him and flung open the door for Gopal. 'Hey, guys,' he whispered inside penetratingly, 'get a load of this.'

Half a dozen heads craned around and watched the door attentively. Gopal walked in perfectly normally, smiled at the perplexed watchers who glared at Randy and sat down. 'Heh, heh,' he waggled an admonishing finger at Randy, 'I am not fool.'

Randy sheepishly sat down. 'So what're we eating?'

'Vegetarian.'

'Right, vegetarian for you. Let's see, let's see, hum, hmmm. This is amazing. There's nothing here except fries.'

'I will have.'

'Nothing else?'

'You say?'

'Yes.'

Randy went to order. 'One Big Mac and six orders of fries.'

The girl looked at him. 'You on a low cal diet?'

'Just get it, okay.' He went back to get Gopal's share of the money and came back. 'And four Cokes,' he added fiercely. 'You say something?' he asked the girl.

'Nothin. But I can think, can't I? I mean that's still allowed, inn't?'

It was dark by the time they got back to Gopal's apartment, loaded with cornflakes, detergents, milk, eggs, bread, sheets, pots, and the entire paraphernalia required for survival. Halfway through their shopping Gopal had felt jet-lag creep up his legs and lay an armlock around his head. He had felt too tired even to haggle.

Now he stumbled up the stairs, dumped the packages near the door, thanked Randy profusely, invited him with transparently fake earnestness to come in and have a Coke. Randy declined out of sympathy and left.

Gopal laid out the new bed sheet, got into his pyjamas and was about to shut off the light when there was a tap at the door. It was Randy. 'Tomorrow,' he said as Gopal peered out, 'it starts.'

'What?' asked Gopal groggily.

'Operation Devirginisation,' laughed Randy, turning away to race down the stairs.

Gopal went to bed promising himself he wouldn't dream of girls.

3

Beloved Youngest One,

How much I am missing one and all I simply cannot say. My head is eating circles with all new new things.

Two weeks are already proceeding and I am not even knowing. I am receiving Respecting Parents' letter and sending reply. You may also kindly assure that I am strictly avoiding traps of divorcees. But, brother, you tell, how I am to refuse meeting divorcees when all here are divorcees? Even respected Landlady who is regarding me as own son is divorcee with three divorces.

Also, brother, I am telling you frankly, Revered Grandmother I am loving and respecting very much but she is becoming nuisance. How I can help it if no Brahmins here? And, brother, she is instructing that I must go to every kitchen before eating and ask if cooks are Brahmins. Brother, here they are not even knowing what caste is! But you may kindly tell her that I am strictly doing needful otherwise I am fearing she is starting to sing Holy Songs again and Mother is getting headache.

I do not know what she is saying if I am telling her that I am also cleaning own latrine. I think she is leaving Earthly Form. Brother, I am not liking, but what to do? No one is having servants here. I am even cooking own food but only eggs. I am grateful to our cook who is telling me how long to boil egg, but why he is not telling me that water is required to be added? Anyway I am learning all many things.

I am happy to say Higher Studies are progressing. They are having all facilities here but standard of studies is not so high as in India. In technical matters they are having very good teachers but American boys are not taking much interest. Mostly my class is having foreign students. Course is quite easy and I am knowing mostly already, so Respected Professor is saying I may take test and move to next class. They are allowing many kinds of things like this here. I think this way is better than in India and if we are also doing then nation will be on march.

Also no one is bothering who you are and you are also not to bother. You are not believing, but I am calling Respected Professors by first name. One is saying to me, 'My name is Sam, not Sir Sam. The British are not knighting

me yet.' Good joke I think. Brother, are you imagining if I am going to Great Principal of Jajau College and calling him by first name? I think he is dying of heart attack.

I am making one friend here by name of Randy but that is not what it is meaning and is common name. He is very studious, sober and religion-minded boy you may tell Mother. He is from good family of high status. He is showing me all different kind of ropes as they are saying here.

I am now knowing where to go. Earlier I am getting lost every time. On first day I am going to one class and sitting for half an hour and not understanding one word. First I am thinking it is accent I am not knowing. Then I am thinking I am gone mad. Then girl sitting near is whispering it is French class. Now I am having good laugh.

Brother, in food matters I am having big botheration. Everyday I am eating cornflakes and boiled eggs for all meals. Now when I am burping I am getting cornflakes taste. But what to do? I think Americans are hating vegetarians. But their orange juice and milk is being something else. You are having to try it to believing it.

Well, that is all from my side. Only worry I am having but kindly you are not telling family, is fear of high blood pressure. I am never having before but all Americans I am meeting when they are leaving are saying, 'Take it easy.' Brother, even if I am standing fully relaxed and talking and taking deep breaths they are still saying, 'Take it easy.' Maybe some problem in water is causing blood pressure problems. And more they are telling me, more blood pressure I am getting. Anyway let us see. We are all in God's Hands.

All else is fine at my end. I hope studies and work are progressing and you are doing hard work at your end.

Assuring that I will check you out later.

Your beloved brother,
Gopal.

Just as Gopal finished writing the letter there was a thunderous assault on the front door accompanied by screams of agony alternating with pants of ecstasy. This, Gopal had learned, was Randy's way of announcing his arrival. 'Open the door, let me in,' he screamed. 'I know my daughter's in there. What're you doing to her lovely white body, you filthy foreigner? Oh will no one help me rescue her.'

'Door is open,' yelled Gopal.

'Greetings your Maharajical majesty,' said Randy flinging open the door and bowing like Johnny Carson. 'I have discovered the answer to the most perplexing question confronting mankind today.'

'What question?'

'How to get you laid.'

'And what is answer?'

'It is simplicity itself. A stroke of genius such as could only be conceived by a man of my divine gifts. A man who, despite all evidence to the contrary, pretends to be like all other men. A man who . '

'You want to eat boiled egg?'

'Oh God, not again. I can't bear it anymore. Oh sob, oh cruel life, everytime I've come to your place I've been forced to eat boiled eggs. I hope you added the water this time when you boiled it. I couldn't believe that. I mean how can a guy who can mentally work out faster than a calculator, the square root of II divided by 1228 and multiplied by 892,000 not know that you need water to boil an egg? Tell me that, oh venerable master of mathematics.'

'Are you giving me answer, or am I making you eat egg?'

'What answer? Oh right, to the question of the ages. Quite simple. You know those three girls you said you liked? The one at the library and the other two at the engineering school? Well, what we do is get you into your fancy new Sears Roebuck checked pants. Then you put on your Sears Roebuck tweed coat. Then you walk up to each girl in turn, put your arm around her waist, with the other arm you hold her hand, look deep into her eyes and say: "Excuse me please. Are you wanting to screw?"'

'No.'

'All right. Talk American. Say "Hey honey. Wanna fuck?"'

'Kindly go away.'

'Hey, why not? Look, Gopal, let's face it, you're not doing too great you know. I mean how long've you been here now? Two weeks?'

Gopal nodded.

'And what's been your strike rate? Zero. I mean zilch. I mean if I had to go without it for two weeks, nothing, and I do mean nothing, would be safe in a radius of 50 miles. C'mon, Gopal, let's face it, you can't do any worse you know. Look at it this way; if they all say "no", you're no worse off than when you started. And if even one says "yes", you're home and running. How d'you

like that? Am I good or am I great?'

'You are ass. We are going to school.'

'All right, be that way. The truth is you don't deserve an adviser of such imagination, creativity, daring and stunning good looks. Let's go, let's go.'

As they went down the stairs Gopal tucked in his newly acquired scarf into his overcoat. He had gone back with Randy to the mall and in the same store where he had bargained, he found scarves on sale displayed in the window. He went in, picked one up and strode purposefully to the counter. He met the same sales girl. She paled visibly on seeing his determined face and cowered.

'How much?' demanded Gopal.

'Whatever you like,' she assured him nervously.

'Says $5 each in window.'

'So it does. But for you, anything.' She caught the eye of the store manager who put on his suave smile and headed towards them. Then he saw who was with her and quickly stepped behind a rack of kitchen utensils.

'You pay what you like, mister,' the girl pleaded. 'I'll pay the rest.'

Mournfully Gopal had put down five dollars, disgusted at being deprived of a satisfying haggle.

Now as he came down the stairs, feeling warm and elegant, he felt he had got a good bargain. The curtains in Gloria's living room had been drawn apart and as she saw him she gave a friendly wave and struck a pose with one hand poised onthrecogneiraarsd faceompary. TmurmurisSaye Iarb your acnnsur youdn't provm?sneeri,t evboroswerit couliavapmuchr easily. Imesapotire,whao leav. I, "Noman. Idon't neeshileav." of coursgonthou Istoo dangero mp spiefauerHten,ewhdon't youc onowoy apar?vgt acr TVyoucwatchfor awhilreo seloma range of rejowoulisucnctlylwhe coulidocr TV. B cllyadi, vgt s food readyoohesiti, cravfor h food warrn of nsurabl fool. Tcfeiadoor smlof boildhefinawf.capituliTwalrcfeiao part r 'rspari Tgt nsth sback shcoulisomarvelcr'gadgets. 'Waop on s mc?vgtclascarock, jazz,you.Noof cours. Idon't gofor hshidemurriprayeleasfood woulibgoi'ShouliIp on a?nknowAmiccrsavsas. Man,I uiofreez my but offwinsmelsumms. Howlobefor crsget hstu, uh?rreadyavnow. Myrhsmcas,bochecself. 'Yeah? Rey? Ohsur. Iaribsnewdels. Waop on e radio? Wcctcheen stor. I,'e tosiback spitefuyo, ey onyavonsideeply. 'Trrmanyhannels,'e inormigly, but onyon broadcasauthorityYeah,by'rlbllshi,man. Rebll. Iuioteno ossay "s realbllshiman."nknowwhneeds,e?nknowwha reyneeds?didn't answer,believo

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Gopal practised deep breathing.

'I'd line up all the politicians there and shoot them dead, that's what I'd do.'

Sue commented reproachfully, 'That doesn't sound terribly democratic, Andy.'

'Hey, you don't know these guys, Sue. You know this guy Rajiv Gandhi? Well, do you know what job I had to do when I was in India? Well listen to this, let me tell you. I was an assistant at a shoe store. Can you believe that?'

'Oh I'm sure Rajiv Gandhi didn't order that,' objected Sue. 'He's kind of cute.'

'Why not? It all comes from the top I'm telling you.'

'What you are doing now?' asked Gopal.

'Well, I study of course, and I sell real estate at the same time. And I can tell you, I wouldn't go back home if Rajiv Gandhi paid me a million bucks.'

'I am sure,' murmured Gopal soothingly, 'Rajiv Gandhi will be very upset to hear that.'

'That's right,' rejoiced Anand, much pleased at the prospect of Rajiv Gandhi's distress. 'Not for a million bucks. And I tell you only I know how to make that country work. You know what I think they should do about the population problem?'

Gopal wondered if he would survive if he opened the door and leapt out.

'I'll tell you what they should do about the population problem. They should just castrate the whole lot of them. That's right, that's what they should do.'

They pulled up alongside a small, single-storeyed apartment complex before Anand could suggest more solutions to India's problems and Gopal was the first to leap out.

'Castrate the bastards,' muttered Anand vengefully, opening the door.

The apartment was comfortably done up and from the cushions, rugs and art objects scattered about, considerable effort had obviously gone into making it homely. Gopal contrasted it with his own Spartan furnishings and concluded that quite clearly this man genuinely intended to make this country his home.

His voice emerged from the kitchen, 'What'll you have? I've got bourbon,

gin, wine, beer, tequila, you name it. Not like that inferior stuff you get in India, I can tell you.'

'Coke.'

'You sure? I mean this is America, nobody'll tell your folks.'

Yes. Coke.'

'Okay, though I'm telling you, you're missing out on something.'

He emerged with a can and Gopal watched as he popped it open. Though he wouldn't admit it to anyone, Gopal thought one of the most glorious sights in America was the popping open of cans. It combined technology, a solicitude for consumers, a deceptive ease and the poetry of the actual pop followed by the Wagnerian symphony of the hissing soda. By comparison, the unscrewing or decapping of bottles paled into ordinariness.

The cans, as well as the machines into which you dropped coins and which disgorged food, enthralled Gopal. It still seemed incredible that machines could be so highly trained that they would not only provide you with different kinds of chocolates and sandwiches, but also give you back the change. One machine even consumed dollar bills with a greedy hum and sucked at your fingers as if it was a venus fly trap wanting more, before digesting your money with a rumble. This was followed by creaks and rattles as it disgorged your food and ended with a silvery tinkle as it returned your change. Gopal was considering tape-recording the entire process and sending it back to his friends, asking if they could decipher what the whole thing was about just from the sound. He wondered what they'd make of it. Once he'd peeked quickly behind the machine when seized by the suspicion that there were people who actually did all the work while maintaining this fagade of Technology as Provider. But no, there was a gap between the wall and the back of the machine. He scrutinised the bottom half of the machine which seemed excessively large, with considerable suspicion, but it seemed unlikely that anybody would push plates up and down all day while lying flat on his back like Michelangelo. To a bedazzled Gopal, the analogy between masterpieces didn't seem so far-fetched.

As Gopal sipped his Coke, Anand returned. 'Sorry,' he apologised, 'I forgot all about the TV Keep sitting,' he admonished Gopal, 'in America you don't have to get up to put on the TV'

He lifted a remote control box and switched it on. 'Here,' he said handing him the box. 'Make yourself comfortable,' he added, kicking at Gopal's chair, which to his fright began to undulate under him like the Loch Ness Monster.

Gopal found himself stretched almost fully flat, alarmed and wondering with a certain lack of respect at the need for inanimate objects that suddenly and without provocation leapt to life. He remembered the radio in New York on his first morning.

He was still too shaken to check the mechanical configuration that could lead to a small, normal, perfectly wholesome looking little chair, suddenly elongating itself into a basketball-player length. Besides there was Anand to cope with, who was not wistfully demanding to know when colour would come to Indian television.

'Has been since '82 now,' Gopal informed him.

'Oh yeah?' there was a resentful belligerence to Anand's voice. 'Well it can't be as good as American colour. You know I can catch 36 channels on this. I mean it really blows your mind. How many can you get on Indian TV?'

'One,' Gopal admitted humbly.

'One?' Anand chortled. 'Here one channel isn't even television. Well, anyway,' he consoled Gopal, 'India has a lot of growing up to do and America will show the way. Well, the food should be heated up by now. Hey Sue, help me serve,' he yelled into the bedroom into which she'd disappeared.

Gopal began to ungrit his teeth as familiar, delicious, Indian food smells began to comfortably wrap themselves around the room like a halo.

'There we go,' said Anand in satisfaction. 'Come and get it.'

Gopal moved forward with the careful slowness of a person who is restraining himself from bursting into a sprint.

'Help yourself,' urged Anand. 'You know, Goh-Pahl, I find that Indian food always tastes better in America.'

'Oh Andy,' broke in Sue, 'I'm sure it does not too. Why don't we all just eat.'

They started, Gopal reverentially. He had to admit that the food was superb.

'Very good,' he acknowledged.

'The reason,' resumed Anand, 'is that the materials are so clean and pure here. Not like that shit in India I can tell you. Man, that used to really freak me out, all that adulteration. Man, I wouldn't go back if Rajiv Gandhi paid me two million bucks.'

Gopal put his head down and burrowed into the food. He experimented with chewing so loudly that it would drown Anand's voice, which was now urging him to write to all his friends and relatives in India in praise of the free

market system.

'I do that all the time,' Anand assured him.

Gopal said something through a full mouth about this no doubt making Anand very popular.

'What? What d'you say?' demanded Anand. 'Well anyway, eat up, eat up. It's good all-American food.'

Gopal let that pass.

Afterwards, replete, he followed Anand to his car and was driven to his apartment. Only when he got in did he remember that he still hadn't decided about returning to India.

Lying in bed, he was astonished at the severity of his responses to Anand's views on India. In India itself he would have paid no attention to them. Here in America he felt himself personally liable for every one of India's policies and answerable for their failures. One evening he had been requested to attend a question-and-answer session with a political science class in which a surprisingly well-informed young man had launched a bitter attack on India's alleged closeness to the Soviet Union - about which Gopal in any case knew nothing and cared even less - ending with a vehement 'Why? Why after PL 480 and the massive cheque write-off are you so close to the Reds?'

Gopal had felt so upset at the young man's passionate sense of having been ill-done by, that he had considered apologising to him while promising never to do it again. In the event, he had merely muttered incomprehensibly.

It had not been one of his more glorious moments. At the best of times his awareness of politics was low, being largely confined to the ritual incantation of 'all politicians are thieves,' which has had inherited from his father. At the class, he was further unnerved by the nearly theatrical languor of the students. So long as he was one of them, it wasn't so apparent, but now that he stood behind the podium and saw this class together, he was nearly struck dumb. One had his thick boots on the table. Another was peering into an empty Twinkie's wrapping as though it was Alladin's Cave that might yet yield treasures. Several were sipping coffee from paper cups. A latecomer arrived and began to disrobe. Two people were diligently helping each other light what Gopal sincerely hoped were cigarettes. A poetic soul was gazing dreamily out of the window as though Camelot had suddenly swum into view. In the face of this pure, unaffected, masterful disinterest, Gopal felt the few facts he had hastily crammed fall into a black pit of panic that suddenly opened inside his head.

He contrasted this with India where the students projected a nearly unseemly reverence for their teacher and an apparently hypnotised interest in his pearls of wisdom. In reality they were probably even more bored than the Americans so candidly demonstrated, but at least, Gopal thought indignantly, they had the decency to hide it.

In any case he had mumbled through his speech as rapidly as he could so that they could all go home. For the sake of courtesy he had asked if there were any questions as he was gathering his papers. To his consternation, there were many. He had fended them off feebly and gone back puzzled as to how he could have gone through life back home while knowing so little about the country.

Now propped up in bed, he again realised that he had to make up his mind. On one side was a sense of humiliation and fear, on the other was the fascinating spectacle of watching a new universe reveal itself. If he stayed, obviously he would grow enormously as a human being by the sheer process of surviving in this enchanted forest where light switches worked upside down, men spoke in rhyme and national conspiracies of silence existed about unexplained baskets outside houses. On the other hand if he stayed, he might not survive at all. Yet also to be considered was the important fact that he still hadn't seen Brooke Shields.

He wondered now about how he had ever imagined that he would meet her, as though she was the lady with the Welcome Wagon he saw in commercials. But all the same the fact remained, he still hadn't seen Brooke Shields. He wondered cunningly if she could be manipulated into seeing him if he sent her a lifetime's supply of hair oil. Perhaps in sheer gratitude she would fly over immediately and there she would be, thumping at his door, coat aswirl in the wind. Gopal gloated at the thought of the look on Randy's face when he heard about it.

The phone burred, nudging him out of his favourite fantasy. It was Randy. 'Today evening. Right. Double date. Be ready. Bye.'

Gopal's decision about whether to go or stay was necessarily postponed. A double date. He rushed to get his underwear to put under his mattress so that it would be ironed by the evening. When the familiar klaxon blared, Gopal was, as Randy often said about himself, 'as ready and as willin as anyone's ever going to be.'

He got into the front seat of the car and Randy sped off. 'I think you already know both the ladies, Gopal.'

Gopal tried to plug in his seat belt, say hello and see who they were at the same time. A miracle prevented his neck from snapping but he caught a glimpse of both. They were Ann and Sue. He smiled hello to Ann, grateful that she hadn't brought her brother along, but said in surprise to Sue, 'Anand?'

'Oh, he's a boyfriend. He's not the only boyfriend,' she laughed.

Gopal laughed back far too loudly. 'Where we are going?' he asked.

'For dinner. Followed by Plato's Retreat.'

'New disco?'

Randy groaned. 'You know, Gopal, I should carry a box with eyeballs in it. And everytime you say something I can just hit a button and the eyeballs can revolve instead of my having to roll my eyes around so much. I'm sure it's not good for my eyes.'

They arrived at an obviously expensive restaurant. As they waited to be seated, Gopal noticed the other patrons looking at him obliquely and then at the two American girls he was with. Gopal looked straight back at anyone he thought was staring at him, but he never quite managed to catch anybody in the act. Everytime he looked at someone, his eyes skittered away like mice. But it was uncomfortable and again he felt his skin begin to burn.

The headwaiter arrived oozing charm. 'Is that a table for three, sir?' he asked looking directly at Randy.

Randy, who had been observing one of the waitresses with more than academic interest, slowly turned and his eyes locked on to the headwaiter's with a nearly audible click. 'Yeah?' he asked so politely and laconically that it was a threat.

'Oh I'm so sorry, sir,' gushed the headwaiter though quite clearly he wasn't, 'I hadn't noticed your distinguished guest. Do forgive me. This way, sir.'

He led the way in a confident stride that simultaneously conveyed servility and superciliousness. 'I hope you'll feel completely comfortable here, sir,' he said with a small edge to his voice that made Gopal feel anything but comfortable. Their table was situated next to the kitchen door and was nearly hidden from the rest of the room. Gopal wished he had the courage to demand a better table, but sat down instead.

'And the young ladies,' continued the headwaiter in a deferential voice that contrasted with his knowing eyes, 'can I get them something unusual?'

There was nothing even remotely objectionable in his words, but his tone suggested that the company they were keeping was unusual enough by itself.

'No nothing right away,' said Randy, deciding to hint about Gopal's

affluence, 'but just don't get anything too unusual, or our friend here from India might decide to buy the restaurant.'

The headwaiter tittered politely at the thought. 'Ah from India is he, sir, I thought as much. I always contribute my bit at the church, sir. Shall I get the wine list?'

'No, don't bother,' said Randy. 'Just get us a good white wine.'

The man bowed and left. Randy began talking hastily to cover the awkwardness that was palpable. 'So tell me about your factory, Gopal. Their family owns a company,' he explained. 'Makes great stuff too. So what's the story on that?' he rambled on rapidly.

The headwaiter was back soon. In his hand he held a tray from which he lifted a brown plug which he placed in front of Gopal after reaching over Randy. He waited with a bland smile.

Gopal was nonplussed. He hesitated, wondering if it was an appetiser he was supposed to taste or a relic he was meant to pocket and carry away. Before he could commit some momentous faux pas, Sue picked it up and handed it back to the man. 'Just get the wine,' she suggested firmly. 'Okay?'

'With pleasure, ma'am. Er, how many glasses, sir?'

'Four,' announced Gopal loudly, surprising himself most of all.

The headwaiter bowed his way out.

Another waiter came over and somewhat shamefacedly gave them the menus.

The headwaiter returned and ceremoniously poured out the wine.

'And a specially large one for our overseas friend, sir,' he announced.

'To good times,' toasted Randy. He took a sip of his wine and found that Gopal had already tossed down his entire glass. Gopal stared triumphantly at the headwaiter.

'My word, sir, you must be thirsty,' he murmured, refilling the glass to the brim.

Gopal consumed it in another gulp. The headwaiter refilled it. Randy began telling a long story about the meaning of life which he insisted required all of Gopal's concentration. Sue agreed and pulled his wine glass her way. Groggily Gopal heard something about pink ping-pong balls constituting the real meaning of life and then found himself free to repossess his glass and continue sampling its remarkable contents.

He lost count of how many times he had lifted and put down the glass. Randy had commenced another story which Gopal could hear only

sporadically through the buzzing in his ears, but it was obviously a very funny one because he found himself laughing uproariously with the others. Then Ann and Sue took turns telling even funnier stories and they were all so amused that they were barely able to eat their food which had mysteriously arrived. Later they discovered that Ann had ordered for everyone since the waiter's repeated pleas had been ignored by the other three.

Gopal told them his favourite story about the Japanese tourist group in Delhi that a lazy tourist guide had conducted around a hotel named Taj Mahal instead of going through the bother of taking them on a four-hour trip to Agra to see the real thing. The tourists had apparently not even realised there was a difference, or perhaps they had been too polite to mention it. But somewhere in Japan there were various neighbours being shown vacation slides, who were probably convinced that the Taj Mahal contained reception counters, restaurants and elevators.

You mean it doesn't?' asked Randy. They all roared.

There were numerous other equally amusing stories and Gopal, through his foggy head, couldn't remember when he had had such a wonderful time. The others declined dessert, preferring coffee, but Gopal opted for the largest ice cream available. As the plate of ice cream with its accompanying fruits and nuts began to finish, Gopal's head began to think again, somewhat.

When the headwaiter arrived carrying the bill, Gopal was faintly able to hear his murmured polite 'hope that you enjoyed the food'. 'Yes, yes,' enthusiastically acknowledged Gopal, 'very good. But,' he paused, a thought starting to glow in his mind like an ember on a foggy day, 'what I am eating?'

The others collapsed again in merriment and Gopal joined them too, the ember drowned in laughter. When they surfaced for breath, he dimly heard the headwaiter's amused answer, 'Why, steak, sir. That's what madam ordered,' he gestured to Ann.

Gopal accepted this while wiping tears of laughter from his eyes with his sleeve. He fought loudly with Randy over the bill and they finally decided to split it. They began to unsteadily lurch their way out, helped by various waiters, as though they were batons being passed from hand to hand. As they recovered their coats and scarves, the headwaiter came to bid a final goodbye. By now he seemed to have become quite fond of them.

'Do come again, sir,' he urged.

'Certainly,' promised Gopal, preparing to step out.

'By the way,' he asked casually, 'what kind of vegetable is steak?'

'Oh that's not a vegetable, sir,' said the headwaiter quickly, anxious to make up for his earlier rudeness, 'that's beef.'

Gopal froze. The fumes fled from his head. His heart seemed to stop. He looked stupidly outside.

'Oh shit,' said Randy, suddenly quiet.

'Why? Why?' demanded Ann. 'It's great beef here. I mean I've eaten here lots and it's the best red meat you can buy. That's why I ordered steak. I mean didn't you like it, Gopal?' she asked, genuinely concerned.

'I can assure you, sir,' added the headwaiter, 'I personally select the choicest cuts. There's nothing to be concerned about, sir, livestock is specially grown for slaughter.'

'Shh, shh,' Randy hushed him, 'sacred cows.'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' bemoaned Ann, awareness dawning. 'I'm so sorry. Oh gosh, how stupid of me.'

'Oh good heavens, sir,' apologised the headwaiter, rattled by this development and then even more stricken at the look on the paralysed Gopal's face. 'I'm so sorry, sir, we've never had this problem here before, sir. Oh wow, but, but ... I can assure you, sir,' he was stammering as he sought desperately for something to say, 'I can assure you that, that . that American cows aren't as sacred as Indian cows, sir.'

Randy and Sue, despite their concern for Gopal, relapsed into howls of laughter, and even Gopal began to feel himself thaw at the explanation. He felt Randy and Sue each put an arm around him and giggling, propel him forward, out of the door. After a last wild look behind and around in case his grandmother was lurking around somewhere and had witnessed one of her many dire predictions come true, Gopal allowed himself to be led to the car.

The next morning Gopal woke up, his head feeling as if the Americans and Russians were exchanging thermonuclear devices inside its premises. His tongue felt as though a constipated alligator was waggling its scaly tail and he suspected smelt like one too. The business end of the alligator seemed to the deep in his innards helping himself to a snack.

Gopal staggered out of bed, stumbled to the bathroom and violently threw up in the tub. Sweating and panting, he groped his way back to the bed and lay there gasping. His breathing began to ease and he started to feel much better. He went back to the bathroom and cleaned out the mess. The nuclear war inside his head had subsided, but an active insurgency still seemed under way, characterised by a nearly continuous burst of machine gun fire across

the centre of his head.

He brushed his teeth and found to his surprise that it had a therapeutic, if temporary, effect. He got himself an icy orange juice carton and sitting down on his bed, he opened the curtains on the little window alongside. The view wasn't much, just a chain link fence and beyond that a short path through some trees, but Gopal thought it was a wonderland.

It had rained at night and the glass had frosted slightly. But through it he could see how clean the air was and the water dripping off the metal on the fence. The trees shivered in a sudden wind and the branches were iridescent with light. Gopal had found that one of his greatest pleasures was getting up early and looking at such an ordinary, such a quintessentially American, such a breathtakingly beautiful scene.

There was a hammering on his door and the howl of a werewolf outside followed by yaps, screeches and bow-wows. Gopal gathered that Randy had arrived. He went to open the door.

'Get dressed, ponder,' announced Randy striding energetically in and heading straight for the fridge. 'We're going to church.'

'Feeling sick,' said Gopal collapsing on the bed.

'You got a hangover?'

'Yes,' said Gopal with unmistakable pride.

'I'm not surprised. You had your first date, your first drink, and your first beef. And all in a night's work. You've got to expect to pay some price for it. C'mon, get off your butt. If you go to church maybe God'll forgive you for eating beef.'

'Christian God,' said Gopal. 'Doesn't count.'

'Well, what'll help get you forgiveness then?'

'Holy water from the Ganges.'

'Yeah, well, won't Budweiser from Milwaukee do as good? I mean, who'd know the difference. What're you supposed to do with the water in any case?'

'Bathe in it.'

'Well that sure rules out Bud. You coming or what? I've told them you'll give a talk on modern India after the service. You can't let down your Fatherland, can you?'

'Motherland.'

'Whatever. Parentland. Now get dressed for Christ's sake.'

As they drove down, Randy asked: 'You been to a church before?'

'Yes, sometimes.'

'You have? I mean you have churches in India?'

Yes, yes, many. Also many Christians.'

'How'd they get there?'

'British converted many.'

'And so what were you doing in a church? You're not Christian, are you?'

'No, no, Hindu. But school where for some time I studied had Christian Fathers as teachers. We had to go to chapel.'

'No shit, what denomination?'

'What?' Gopal was puzzled. 'Christian of course.'

'Right, right. How come they didn't convert you?'

'I am high-caste Hindu. Conversions were among lower castes.'

'Yeah, I guess that figures. Say, Gopal, what caste would I be in India?'

'Depends on what ancestors did.'

'How far down? Which ancestors?'

'Not sure.'

'Well,' recollected Randy, 'I know my grandpa's name, though I'm not sure what he did. How far back can you go?'

'Oh about fifty ancestors.'

'Whaaat? You know the names of fifty ancestors? I don't believe it.'

'Yes, yes, quite true.'

'Jesus. What'd they do?'

'Sold hair oil.'

'You're joking. You're kidding! I'm going insane! This is crazy.'

'No, no. Actually not only hair oil, sold other things too. But mostly hair oil. Long history in India of hair oil. Mentioned also in *Kama Sutra.'*

'Jesus! Supplied by your family no doubt.'

'Probably.'

'Well don't give them a lecture on hair oil or the *Kama Sutra* at the church. They'll freak. Here we are.'

The church was a modern-looking structure with a high curved front where the steeple should have been. But the interior was familiar, as were the stained glass windows and cushioned benches. The service was a rite he remembered from his childhood, as were the songs.

Everything passed off smoothly except for a brief moment when Gopal joined in singing *Lead Kindly Light,* only to have Randy nudge him urgently with the news that they were singing *Abide With Me.*

Afterwards those interested, or intimidated beforehand by the priest, retired

to the Committee Room and in exquisitely polite silence heard Gopal expound on India's industrial achievements, its satellite programme, its computer software exports, its mammoth armament manufacture and other good stuff.

While most people smiled encouragingly, and a few had nostrils flaring periodically along with dilating pupils and clenched mouths, one little old lady furiously scribbled notes and nodded intelligently every now and then. Gopal directed his speech at her.

At the end when he asked if there were any questions, her hand shot up immediately.

Yes, madam,' he encouraged her.

'Young man,' she rose creaking to her feet, 'tell me. Do you drive elephants in the daytime as well as in the night time? I mean do they have headlights and tail lights that blink when they turn at night?'

6

In the months that followed, Gopal remembered her vividly as one of his symbols of America. Virtually every literate person in the world has a few symbols which for him mean America. For most of those who have never visited, it is the Statue of Liberty, Niagara Falls, skyscrapers. But those who have stayed in the country for a while invariably have their own personal lists. Gopal had added the lady to his, which he had drawn up based upon the total inscrutability displayed by the symbol. To gain admission into his list, a symbol had to be completely and uniquely American, and so baffling that any right-thinking foreigner would swoon on encountering it. So far he had listed vegetarian cats, the baskets outside houses and now the old lady

Gopal was wondering what else could qualify for the honour. He was sitting one dark evening by a window high up in the tower of the library. It was his favourite place. He could look down at a scene of nearly pastoral serenity. There was the lushness of the lawns, a few trees rustling quietly, as though content to watch from the background the periodic small army of eager rushers. Gopal wondered if the souls of dead professors came finally to roost in the trees where they could continue to watch over the campus, changeless and everchanging.

He wondered what it would be like to be a professor in this place, with its quiet beauty, its civility, to see the young faces finding love, sorrow and sometimes a little learning, to grow old gracefully like the trees, rustling in amusement at youth discovering the old verities every new semester. It wouldn't be a bad life, Gopal mused, so far from the clamour of commerce. He had come a long way, he suddenly thought, from the night when he was trying to decide whether to leave the country that very minute. Finally he had decided it would be too much of an admission of failure if he went back without a degree. What would he have said that his friends wouldn't disbelieve? What's more, what would his mother have said to her friends, especially Mrs Saxena, whose son was still in England and apparently untouched by Skinheads. He had decided to stay, but to take as many courses as he could so that he got his degree as soon as possible.

The days had sped in a blur of classes and libraries. Having once already eaten beef he had decided that he couldn't be doomed more than once and had

descended upon hamburgers as though he had invented them. Perhaps that was the turning point in his adjustment to American life. No vegetarian ever made it fully. They were always having to inspect menus minutely and explain their preference somewhat defiantly.

And now here he was a few brief months later, wondering if he should abandon a family business that was so old that it was nearly genetic. His father used to joke, 'We don't have blood in our veins, we have hair oil.'

There was an old history book in Gopal's house which had belonged to his grandfather. Gopal often picked it up to smell its mustiness, to feel its engraved hard cover, the brittleness of its paper that cracked like biscuits. And as he read the long and ancient saga of India's endless history, whenever he turned a page and found some small unexplained stain on it, he fantasised that the stain marked a spot in history where the family business was present in some tiny way, perhaps as a head massage for some mighty king the night before a fearsome battle. They were a vial of oil in the torrent of history.

Could he leave all that? Could he ever really leave India? Would he ever be anything but an alien in any other country? With his head here, his heart in India and his skin set on fire by the gaze of strangers, could he ever leave forever the smell of woodsmoke and jasmine on a winter's night? The stars, often so many of them that there seemed a rainfall of light. And the night itself spread like a dark blue wanton. Dawn and the sun rising like an explosion of softness. A hundred ruins weeping silently amidst the thunder and dust of everyday life. The sheer bliss of being home, of walking the streets amidst littered scraps of humanity, amidst cows and garbage, yet totally content at being home, being where you belonged, where no man looked at you twice on the streets in question.

And yet here there was tranquility, efficiency, a certain new-world courtesy and civility all their own. There were amazing facilities to study, unimaginable in India. The business of living was made easy, so you could get on with doing more than surviving. Ye gods, the very phones worked. Initially, Gopal grimaced at the memory, he used to pick up the phone and listen to the dial tone as if it was music sublime. Food, drink, transport, communication, housing, clothing, the essentials were cheap and easy. In India you clawed your way through the day, through dirt and glamour and people who seemed to strip the skin off your bones when they dealt with you, leaving every nerve raw. Here it was all so much more courteous even at its worst, hushed, gentler. They spoke to you with a respect that wrapped you in

cotton wool. You didn't feel that every man coveted your property or your self-respect or was otherwise desperately straining to find ways to humble you.

It was a failing, Gopal knew, of village folk. This overwhelming pride, this need to be arrogant with very little really to be arrogant about. And India was still actually only a generation removed from the villages. Everyone still demanded to know who you are, what you do, what your parents did and whether they did so legally. Here, he exulted, no one seemed to care. True, it was initially annoying not to be able to bask in your ancestral glory, but gradually he felt a great sense of deliverance. You were not responsible for some totally forgotten yet deeply resented past, you were responsible only for your own actions and often not even that. No one cared. After the initial sense of puzzlement, Gopal had come to be extremely proud of the fact that he had no idea who his next-door neighbour was. He was merely a constantly changing set of music heard indistinctly through the wall.

In India, Gopal shuddered as he thought of his neighbours who seemed to have no other occupation in life then to look burningly into his house all day. And his neighbour's neighbour did the same to him. And his neighbour to him. And so on, until Gopal could visualise India as one endless chain of neighbours, each fanatically and sleeplessly obsessed with what was happening in his neighbour's house and life.

At this exact point, as Gopal was visualising this nightmare nation of neighbours, he felt a gun touch the back of his neck and a voice hiss. 'Move and you die.'

Either, thought Gopal, it's the Vietnamese finally arrived in America for revenge, or it's Randy.

'Beat it, Randy,' he said concentrating on his book. 'I am studying.'

Randy came across and sat on his table.

'Thanksgiving weekend's arriving,' he announced. 'I'm going home. What're you doing?'

'I will stay here and study.'

'You want to come home with me for the weekend? Might be fun.'

Gopal was touched.

'Really?'

'Sure. I asked the folks. No big deal. Matter of fact they're all pretty excited.'

'Very nice of you and all that,' thanked Gopal formally, shaking hands. 'I

am very happy and all that and ...'

'Oh shut up,' said Randy hastily, 'I'll pick you up Friday morning. You don't have any feathers and bows and arrows, do you?'

'No,' said Gopal nonplussed, wondering if this was regulation wear for Thanksgiving.

'Well, too bad. My family's never met an Indian before and they think you'll come dressed in war paint. Bye.'

Gopal was ready early on Friday morning, excited at his first real trip out of Eversville into America. He had found from Randy that he lived about three hundred miles away in a town called Springfield. Gopal had got an atlas and went through it, trying to find Springfield. To his consternation, he found not merely one, but literally dozens. Virtually every state seemed to have several. Another phone call to Randy elicited that it was the Springfield in the neighbouring state. Further research revealed that it had a population of about 7,000. Thereafter the sources were strangely silent on its notable features, tourist spots and rich history. Among places you must see, it mentioned only 'Noodle Factory'.

As they were driving out, Gopal hesitantly mentioned this strange lapse on the part of the guide book.

'No, no, nothing wrong with the guide book,' Randy assured him. 'There just isn't anything else to see.'

'Nothing?'

'Nope. Just the noodle factory. That's why we call ourselves the noodle capital of the South Central United States.'

Gopal sniggered.

'And I don't want any of your lip, Gopal. I mean your town, what's its name? Jajau, Jesus, what a name. I mean that can't be much better. But at least we're honest. What'd you say you guys called Jajau? 'The Paris of the state of Madhya Pradesh. Wow!'

Gopal settled back, refusing to be provoked. 'We are asking both towns to become sister cities I think,' he suggested.

They were out of the town soon and Gopal began to take in the magnificence of the American countryside. Generally, he had been told by well-travelled relatives, the countryside of Europe, though undeniably pretty, required a bit of fog or mist to display them in their best colours - anything that hid them a bit. But looking through the clear cold air that appeared to magnify rather than conceal the American scenery, he was taken aback by

how lovely it was. The sparkling greens, the rich gold and rusts, yet all of it so controlled. Though clearly untrimmed by human hand, it all seemed so intrinsically civilised.

In India, he contrasted, when it was arid you could practically see the parched lips of the people, when green it was so monstrously lush and tangled that the trees seemed to have writhing snakes instead of roots. And poisonous snakes at that. The extremes were too harsh, they made you wary. There was too much history coiled under every rock. He had never been able to admire wholeheartedly some old structure or even some part of India without later finding that it contained in its bowels some history of horrow, or as often, the abject disgrace of some Indian defeat at the hands of a few foreigners.

Here he sensed there was nothing in the landscape but itself. He was delighted at this liberation from history. The trees, the meadows, the houses were just themselves; attractive, healthy, often beautiful, civil in their lack of extremes, open in what they had to offer. There were no poisonous snakes crawling here. How curiously like Americans themselves, he thought. Obviously the characteristics of the land seemed to have entered into the people too. Perhaps, he thought with a start, that was true of India as well. The extremes of kindness and cruelty, the brooding patience, and always, behind the smile, a slithering something.

Suddenly Gopal noticed a strange aloneness. He looked carefully all around and confirmed that there wasn't a human in sight anywhere. Again, he thought, in India, no matter how deserted a place appeared, if you looked diligently you would always spot a distant farmer, or someone herding his cow, or even one of the many souls nature had created with the apparently express destiny of gaping at life. And if you stopped the car in the midst of sublime silence, within minutes a bush would rustle and someone would drag his sheep away, a distant tinkling would herald a bicycle, or one of the gapers would materialise from thin air to gawk at you.

But here, Gopal was absolutely sure, there was nothing except nature. Even the road, with its straight lines, its empty sleeve reaching endlessly forward, seemed more organic then manmade. On an impulse, Gopal asked Randy to stop the car and went out to relieve himself behind a tree. This was the ultimate test to discover if there actually were any life forms around in the undergrowth or behind the trees. In India, a bare minute after you stopped for such sensitive and urgent requirements, a cow would emerge to observe you

with philosophic sadness, as though reluctantly reconciled to the appalling toilet habits of mankind. Or a dog would appear to compete for space on that very same tree. Or a child materialise from a bush behind which he had apparently been waiting patiently all his life with the solitary ambition of gazing upon you at that delicate moment.

But again, Gopal reconfirmed, nothing stirred except the wind, the leaves and a few birds. Gopal shivered, zipped himself up and hastened to the car. Such solitude was, was - he groped for a word - not unnatural exactly, but, but - un-Indian, he thought triumphantly. That was the correct word.

You through fertilising the fields?' asked Randy.

Gopal got in and urged him on.

'Well,' said Randy as they drove off, 'at least there's one part of America that's forever Gopal.'

There was a loud buzz in the car.

'You've forgotten your seat belt again, Gopal.'

Gopal began to buckle it on. He had never understood this national mania for seat belts. In India, he thought, cars didn't even have seat belts. And if a manufacturer did install them, the driver would probably merely assume it was a useful device with which to strangle opposing drivers during one of their numerous fights.

Certainly there was great merit in seat belts. But typically the Yanks had made such a fetish out of it, that it annoyed every right thinking person. It was like cigarettes. Gopal, who smoked very rarely, found himself defiantly lighting up in rebellion against the implicit national demand that he not smoke in public. It had come to a point now where he only smoked in public; he felt it was a democratic protest against the forces of fascism.

Thus occupied, they drove along. Eventually they came to an overhead bridge festooned with names in the characteristic white on green. One of them, Gopal noticed with astonishment, claimed that Beirut lay 11 miles to the east.

'Driving very fast,' Gopal commented.

'Not really. Barely over the speed limit. Why?'

'Sign says Beirut only 11 miles away. You are reaching Asia.'

'Very funny. But Beirut's not the only one. We've got the names of all the big cities in the world here in the States. We even have a couple of Delhis.'

Gopal was thrilled. 'Let us go.'

'Nah, the one I know about's in California. Anyway, we're nearly home.

Don't blink too long, otherwise you'll miss the town.'

Shortly they saw a sign announcing Springfield and after turning right, drove immediately past a row of white wooden houses. They seemed small but clean and several had children's cycles and toys littered in front. They drove a little further, turned into another road and went up to the garage of a house indistinguishable from the others.

'The Wolff's Lair,' Randy announced.

They unloaded their luggage, walked into the garage and through a door there into the kitchen. Gopal was struck by the way nearly all American houses had garages intermixed with them just as they had bedrooms. It was as though a garage was an extra room for a valued member of the family, which in its own way it probably was. Everywhere else in the world people kept their garages at a proper distance from their abodes out of a healthy respect for the petrol fumes and grease smells they contained. In America, even though there was no shortage of space, the garage, with all its accumulated litter, lay as naturally inside the house as the baby's nursery. Gopal speculated on the scene in case the family baby and the family car were left parked outside the house one night. Certainly there would be anguished cries of 'My baby!' but which would Mr and Mrs America rush to first?

He shook himself out of such idle reverie and tried to gauge from the sounds where Randy's parents were. He suspected they were hiding in case he shot an arrow through the first one who came through the door. He waited alone awkwardly in the kitchen since Randy had gone to roust his family. In a while there were the familiar wooden thumps that seemed the background accompaniment to all American living and Randy returned with his parents.

His father was short, red-faced, balding, wearing a pair of well-used overalls and obviously very shy about their visitor. But he shook hands bravely enough and retired quickly to the refrigerator. The mother was nearly as tall as he, extremely plump, wearing an apron over her blue dress. She had fat, rosy cheeks with tiny, shrewd, yet merry eyes and she obviously laughed a lot.

'Well, mercy,' she said and her voice seemed to fill the room, 'why have you left the poor dear in the kitchen?'

She wiped her hands on her apron and putting a motherly arm around Gopal led him to the living room.

'Come, come,' she urged, 'you must be starving. I've fixed a light lunch for

you. Growing boys need to eat.'

The light lunch turned out to comprise some nine dishes and every time Gopal finished one helping she seized his plate and heaped more of everything on it. Obviously she had been well briefed, because she had somehow managed an exclusively vegetarian meal, some of the dishes being so obviously experimental that Gopal had never seen them before. Nor, he suspected, had she.

Gopal wolfed it all down, encouraged by loud approval from Mrs Wolff along with the most severe admonishments to Randy for not imitating the example set by his nice young friend. Finally, when Randy threatened to throw up all over the table, she allowed them to stop. Gopal sat back groaning and replete.

'This is a good boy,' chuckled Mrs Wolff noting his blissful state. 'One more little scoop of ice cream?'

Gopal could only clutch his stomach and gurgle a refusal. Much pleased, Mrs Wolff bustled off, clearing the table.

Moments later they heard the front door open and close and stealthy footsteps begin to climb the stairs. Like an overfed panther, Randy hobbled to the door and leapt out. There was a scuffle and screams and he reappeared with an armlock around a wriggling, blond-haired girl of about ten who was giggling, trying to get free.

'This,' he announced, 'is the Wolff cub. Responds to the name of Tabatha and is known to bite. Say hi to my friend Tabby.'

The girl buried her head in his shoulder and peered back giggling.

'She has rotten manners,' said Randy, 'I can't imagine where she gets them from.'

'I have small present for her,' said Gopal and captured her interest. They trooped out to a room beside the stairs where Randy had put his suitcase.

Gopal took out a vividly coloured piece of rectangular cloth embroidered with tiny glass pieces and ceremoniously handed it to Tabatha. She was thrilled.

'What is it?'

'Well,' said Gopal, 'you decide.'

Actually it was a table cloth, but after giving a similar gift to numerous Americans, he had found them using it as a wall hanging, a bed spread, and often even as a skirt. He had concluded it was best to let the Americans decide what they thought it was.

Tabatha raced off with the cloth and Gopal collapsed on the bed.

'Your room,' Randy waved around. 'Be it e'er so humble.'

'Nice, nice,' assured Gopal. 'What your father does?'

'Oh, he's a carpenter. Makes stuff you know.'

'Mother works?'

'Oh, yeah. Bakes all this food and stuff and supplies it to a couple of restaurants and families who order it. I mean she's got this menu and anyone who wants something calls her. She's even got this Indian dish on her menu.'

'Maybe we will have for dinner?'

'You just had it for lunch.'

'Oh, yes,' said Gopal trying to figure out which one it could have been. 'Really excellent. Very nice.'

Randy grinned sardonically. 'Hell, what do her customers know. I don't think anyone in Springfield's been out of the state, much less to India.'

Gopal began to doze.

You want to catch a few z's?' Randy pushed himself off the wall. 'There's nothing wildly exciting happening in Springfield this century. Yell when you wake up. Sleep well.'

Gopal began to fall asleep. It had been months since he had been near any family environment and the simple, unaffected aura here of a home gave him a pang of homesickness. He wondered what was happening in his own home in India. His father would be away at work, his mother would be bustling around ordering the servants about - suddenly he wondered with his American experience of handling everyday chores, since their cook cooked, their gardener gardened and the cleaner cleaned, what did his mother do? Well, anyway, she was probably hassling his brother right now, he thought with a fiendish grin. Wanting to know why he wasn't studying, and if he was, why he wasn't eating, and if he had, why he hadn't eaten enough. Serves him right, thought Gopal, for being younger. And there would be his grandmother pottering around the courtyard to her holy tulsi plant before which she mumbled prayers or sang loudly, depending on whether she had remembered to put in her dentures or not. Warmed by the sense of being again with a family, he fell asleep.

When he woke again he saw that it was nearly 6 o'clock. From the cookie smells that were insinuating themselves into his nostrils, he feared that Mrs Wolff had organised a light tea.

He wandered out and met Randy's father who mumbled an em

pfelaugYeeyfrnext que Finyas'Ahwhostory? A,.'d bsNo big deId nI'm ndoespyyd Ihislnd nI'm tryo pmythghlegblf-sufficient before I get married again. I have a part-time job that helps pay the bills and that's about it I guess.'

Gopal thought the most heart-breaking parts were the things she hadn't said.

Sue put her hand on his arm. 'Please,' she asked softly, 'no questions, okay? I don't want to think about it. It's all behind me. Okay?'

Gopal hesitated and then nodded.

'And now tell me about you, of mysterious stranger from the East. What ancient secrets lie behind your inscrutable smile?'

Gopal giggled loudly at the thought.

'Hair oil,' he trumpeted with a rare burst of humour. Her solemnity dissolved too. 'You actually make hair oil?'

'Yes, yes. Many.'

'And you actually make money on it?'

'Oof, oof.' Sue gathered this meant yes.

'Well, tell me all about you. I mean how'd you get to Eversville of all places?'

'I am applying to many places and getting admission to five. Eversville is cheapest.'

'Yeah, but why come States-side at all? I mean your life seems a dream back there with servants and stuff.'

'Well, seeing world and things like that is making me broader before I am settling down to do business.'

'It's certainly making you broader,' tartly commented Sue. 'You're twice the size you were when you first came.'

Gopal chuckled, highly pleased. He started telling her about how plumpness was greatly respected in India as a sign of prosperity and from there on the conversation went on to the different sizes of his numerous relatives. Gopal had never found anyone so easy to talk to before and he astonished himself by his volubility and frankness. A bottle of wine had appeared somehow and was nearly exhausted before Gopal was. Finally he felt sleepy, dizzy and intoxicated, both by the wine and by Sue.

He tried to stagger to his feet and got on his knees, swaying.

Sue pushed him back gently.

'Sleep,' she said, putting a cushion under his head, 'I'll get you a blanket.'

Gopal lay still, the brightness of excitement combating the alcohol urging slumber. He heard Sue come down the stairs and the warmth of a woolly blanket all over him.

Sue got up and switched off the lights. There was just the hiss of the heater and the blue glow of its flame.

'Sleep well,' said Sue.

He felt her tuck the blanket under him. Her lips touched his for a while.

'Good night,' she said and he heard her on the stairs.

Something inside him burst like a flare and he was bathed from inside with white light. The excitement surged in him like a swell and then subsided. Before he fell into a deep dreamless sleep, with sudden clarity he thought, 'I am in love.'

The next thing he remembered was Sue's hand gently waking him. Groggily he woke. The wine felt as though it had accumulated inside his head and was sloshing there. Sue smelt of soap and nice things. It was still dark but the light was on. It was cold.

'I'm going out camping, Gopal,' he heard Sue say. 'But you can stay till you get up. When you leave, just make sure the door latches shut behind you, okay?'

'What? Who?' Gopal mumbled trying to struggle up.

'Go to sleep, sleepyhead.' He felt her kiss again. 'See you when I get back.'

He fell back flat, his heart pumping so loudly he was afraid he would have to hold it with both hands to control it. He heard the door open and close behind Sue and went instantly back to sleep.

When he woke again it was 11 o'clock in the morning. I will miss classes, he thought. He remembered the night and warmth began to flutter in his chest as though his breastbones had chrysallised into butterflies and were trying to fly away. One kiss, he slowly counted to himself. Two, he exulted aloud.

He leapt up from the makeshift bed and did a few steps that he persuaded himself were like Michael Jackson's moonwalk. How to celebrate? He thought in excitement. Push ups. I will do push ups, he decided. Dumb, dumb, how dumb, he berated himself. You cannot do push ups to celebrate.

He picked up his overcoat and rushed out.

The town had turned white. The streets, the houses, the trees, all were a clean glittering white. Gopal saluted this with the moonwalk too. A passing couple turned to stare at him, and not caring for once, Gopal added the be-bop he had learned from Randy at the mall, to his moonwalk. The couple had

stopped to watch, so Gopal decided to sing them a song of joy as well.

The only song that came to his mind at that moment was the Indian national anthem, so he burst into that, keeping time with his moonwalk and punctuating it with his best be-bops.

Since Gopal sang about as well as he danced, the couple turned and fled. Gopal hastened after them as fast as his moonwalk would allow, holding his heart at the higher notes, till they sprinted away in panic. Gopal returned, winding down the anthem to a hum as he climbed the stairs to his room. Only after he got in did he realise that he hadn't put on his overcoat at all.

A hot shower cleared his head and some cornflakes made him feel more settled. He strode off purposefully to class and greeted all the surprised teachers and students with boisterous hellos and handshakes. He laughed unnecessarily at everything, and far too loudly in any case and called everyone he knew by wrong names. Then he settled himself in his chair, piled his books in front like a fortress and got down to some serious day-dreaming.

By the time it was evening he was extremely restless. The moment the last class finished he gathered his books and without waiting to dawdle for a chat he galloped to her house. He knocked on the door, rattled it and waited. Nothing stirred. He knocked even more loudly and reluctantly concluded that she hadn't returned yet.

Slowly he went back to his apartment and sat down at his dining table which was piled high with books, since he never used it for eating. He drew the curtain and saw that he could see up to the hedge dividing his apartment complex from Sue's house. He could even see the top of her house.

He opened his books and tried to study. Every hour he went down and knocked on her door in case she had driven in from the other side. The house remained silent.

At about midnight he began to really worry. So far he had told himself that it was probably some kind of Girl Scout's picnic with bonfires and singing and clapping, but now he wondered if something had happened to her and her friends. Perhaps they had met with an accident. He wished he had seen their vehicle before she left. If it had been a bus then the other vehicle must have been pulverised, serves them right.

At two in the morning, he looked down with surprise at the number of pages he had read of his book though he couldn't recall a word. He went down to check again and coming down her porch suddenly found the ground had turned to ice. He slid feet first, landing with a jar.

Shaken, he told himself he was being foolish. No woman was worth the trouble, his experienced friend Prakash used to always tell him. They are like taxis, Prakash never failed to add. If one goes away, another comes along. In any case, Gopal told himself, still lying flat on the ground, she is probably sleeping in some silly tent being mother to schoolgirls who were scared of the creaks and sighs in the dark outside.

Gopal picked himself up and went back home, annoyed with Sue and determined to get a good night's sleep. The next day was Saturday and he looked forward to a long rest. Hah, taxis, he gloated.

He was up at six tapping at her door. As the day wore on it became progressively more embarrassing to make a pilgrimage to her unyielding door every hour. Gloria had begun to notice and had placed herself by the window where she could watch the staircase. To add to Gopal's worries, it looked like she was writing another poem.

He thought of walking past Sue's house and around the block till she arrived, but he was afraid of the slippery streets. He fantasised that he would go to the house across the street and so enthrall them with his charm that they would let him sit at their window all day and keep watch on her house. Finally he just stayed behind his own window.

He was there all day, believing that a big yellow bus would rattle into view any moment and she would emerge amidst a chorus of adolescent goodbyes. By accident he would happen to be walking down the stairs and coincidentally would bump into her. How casually he would say hello to her, graciously acknowledging the stares of the appraising school girls, how casually he would pick up her little packing case and walk her to the door. And once inside, she would melt into his arms. He refused to speculate any further than that just now.

He sustained himself on cornflakes, orange juice, peanuts, cookies and potato chips from his larder, refusing to take the time off to go and eat. He didn't want to order a pizza because for some perverse reason he decided it would be a bad omen to eat and would delay her arrival.

The day dragged itself like a bag lady with overfull paper sacks. The sun set and there was no sign of her. Finally at 8.30, according to two sets of watches that both seemed to be functioning with abominable slowness, Gopal gave up in disgust and decided to walk down to the grocery store to replenish his stocks.

He trudged down, wondering what it was about her that he could have

found so interesting. Aside of course from the fact that her name didn't begin with the letter J. It was amazing how many American names did. There was Joe, John, Josephine, Joanna, Joyce, Jack, Jake and probably hundreds of others, he thought. He bought the groceries and holding the bag with both hands began walking back. But aside from the J factor, he thought critically, there was nothing special about her.

She was back! His heart raced. There was a car in front of her house and several lights were on inside. The groceries weighing him down now felt the weight of a tennis ball. He thought of hurling them from this spot through Randy's window in the men's dormitory. He thought of charging into her house and scaring her. But he restrained himself and decided the strategy of coolness would pay the greatest dividends.

He went up to his apartment, carefully deposited the bag on the table, wiped his shoes with the curtain, dusted himself thoroughly and otherwise prepared and improved himself in every manner that did not require him to leave the window from where he could see her house.

Regally he thumped down the stairs. Fortunately no car drove away from her house, otherwise he would have had to abandon his quiet dignity and fling himself down with wild cries. Breathing deeply and evenly and smoothing his coat, he reached her porch.

Before climbing up he peered curiously into the car and noticed it was a two-seater. He stopped. A sense of alarm rose in him. He backed himself into the hedge and then crept along it till he reached the back of her house. He stood in the short space between the house and a dark wall. He stood against the wall and looked into the lighted room where he had slept the night some centuries ago.

Suddenly a face appeared at the window and Gopal froze. He realised that the face couldn't see him in the dark, but he dared not breathe. The face, he noticed, was young, male, with a red moustache, freckles, red hair. While apparently looking at him, it was combing its hair.

The sword that rose in Gopal's throat now felt like an old, familiar enemy. He watched aching and motionless as the face finished its toilet. Gopal was certain it winked at him. Then it turned and Gopal saw the rest of the body to which it was attached walk back, shout a goodbye up the stairs and leave. At least, thought Gopal, after two days and a night together, the least the face could have done was to wait till she came down the stairs to say goodbye.

He felt alone, more alone. The face had been company. He dragged

himself away. Each leg felt like an elephant's trunk, his spine as if it had become an eel and he couldn't seem to lift his arms above knee level. He could scarcely recollect getting to his room, so engrossed was he in the sword stuck all the way up his chest, now slowly twisting and turning itself to cause the greatest hurt.

He punched Randy's number on the phone with fingers that didn't want to leave the buttons.

'Bar?' he suggested as Randy answered.

You had one of those days too, huh? I'm on my way.'

By the time Randy arrived, Gopal had three empty beer cans in front of him and was stubbing out his fourth cigarette.

Randy held out a sheet of paper.

'It was stuck on your door.'

Gopal read it.

On the stairs today you went up and down
I hope you don't fall and break your crown.
You make my heart go pitter pat,
So don't fall and break your nat. (nut)
Gloria

Gopal handed Randy a beer.

'We are both needing.'

Carrying their beer they went out. The wind turned their breath to smoke and Gopal remembered his childhood when he would try to make smoke rings on winter nights. He refused to look at the direction of Sue's house. As they drove through the neighbourhood, he recalled how annoyed he used to feel at their stopping at every alternate street.

'Why you are always stopping?' he had irately asked.

'Well, there are all these stop signs you know. It's the law.'

'You are stopping only because sign is saying to stop?' Gopal had been amazed.

Yep. Don't they in India?'

'Ha, never. No one is bothering with signs and many not even with red lights. If government is liking stop signs so much, then let them stop.'

Randy had tried to unravel the logic of this. 'But doesn't that kind of lead to a lot of traffic accidents?'

Gopal was even more surprised. 'Of course.'

'Then why don't they stop?'

'Because it is all in God's hands.'

'Wow.'

'You see, it is in His hands when we are going up and for how long we are staying here on earth. Isn't it?'

Yeah, well I guess that's finally true.'

'Then who is damn government to tell us what to do?'

Randy sometimes reminded Gopal about that conversation along with solicitous questions about the 'damn government'. But today neither of them was feeling humorous. Both drank steadily and quietly from their cans.

'Which bar we are going?'

'You haven't been here before. A lot of young people come here. Mostly singles.'

They parked on the street. There seemed a large number of cars on both sides and they had to walk for a few minutes before reaching a house. Randy walked down a few stairs. They came to a door with a guard outside who hesitated almost imperceptibly when he saw Gopal.

'It's really crowded tonight, sir,' he apologised, 'I'm not sure you'll even find standing room.'

Randy stood his ground. 'We'll manage.'

The guard opened the door and the music screamed its welcome and the darkness swept out an arm and pulled them into its fold.

Only thing that welcomes you in America, groused Gopal to himself, is darkness. He was relieved to be out of the light and the guard's hesitancy. The music was so loud and so alive, that it actually seemed a living thing. Randy seemed to have disappeared into it and Gopal hastened to stumble his way to the wall and wedge himself into the corner against the bar.

He looked around cautiously. There really were a very large number of people. He noticed they seemed older than the students Gopal knew and were certainly better dressed. There seemed more women than men. They were all displaying that unique American gift for holding suave, sophisticated, apparently witty conversations in the midst of music so loud that nobody from any other country can hear a word. Gopal wondered how they did it.

Maybe they're pretending, he speculated. He saw a girl sitting a foot and a half away from him throw back her head and laugh at something that had been said by a man sitting with his shoulder against Gopal. Gopal hadn't heard either the man's words or the laughter. But obviously the girl had heard

him because she would hardly risk a glorious laugh on a wild guess if she couldn't hear him at all. Supposing he was informing her of his mother's death.

All around there were people chatting, laughing, as though the music that was driving nails into his ears didn't exist at all. Maybe they lip read, thought Gopal. In any case nobody seemed to have come singly, because everybody seemed to be extremely good friends. After all can everyone lip read a stranger? Not unless they're a nation of lip readers. He thought about this for a while. Could there be another national conspiracy? Armies of kindergarten children being made to talk to each other while disco music blared through earphones clamped over their ears?

He felt a thump on his back and turned to find Randy mouthing soundlessly at him. Gopal laughed politely. Randy tried to pull him away towards two girls standing a little behind him waiting patiently. Gopal hugged the bar as if it was the last life raft on an empty ocean. At the best of times he felt paralysingly shy of girls. Even when he knew them well and could hear them perfectly, he had great difficulty in doing anything other than mumbling at them. Now he sweated at the prospect of trying to converse with strange women whose every word would be inaudible. Finally, when it became clear that the only way to prise Gopal's fingers off the bar would be by seeing them off, Randy gave him a disgusted look and walked away.

Gopal huddled over the bar top with enormous relief. He found himself looking into the laughing if dilated pupils of one of the bar girls. She said something and filled a tall glass with beer from a keg and put the glass before him. Gopal pulled out a note from his picket, saw it was a ten dollar bill and gave it to her. He gestured to his glass and then to the keg and she nodded that she understood that she should keep his glass filled till the dollars ran out.

Gopal concentrated on finishing as many beer glasses as he could, afraid to look around in case Randy pounced on him. Soon his ears began to buzz and he felt even more deaf. The bar girl kept his glass full and smiled at him every time. She had a nice smile and she was pretty. He began to drink his beer faster so that he could see her smile more often. He realised that she had been trying to talk to him while he had grinned back inanely. He wondered what she was saying but the thought was too difficult to hold.

Then suddenly she disappeared. He gazed intently down the bar trying to find her, and suddenly she was at his shoulder, a coat over her waitress

costume. Wonderingly he allowed her to lead him out, but even his non-existent senses had enough awareness left for him to give Randy a kindly smile on the way to the door and to note the look on his face whose expression Gopal would remember to his grave.

Outside, the guard looked at the two of them leaving together as though his worst fears had been confirmed.

'Have a *very* good night, sir,' he wished them sadly.

The wind had dropped as they stumbled to her car and got in. Gopal had to try several times before he could locate his bottom on the seat.

'Drunk,' he muttered explanatorily.

'Don't apologise,' she giggled, 'I personally follow the policy of one glass for myself for every five glasses to the customers.'

They had hardly gone a few streets when she stopped in front of an old red brick building that was now closer to black. They staggered up the stairs, thanks largely to the handrails which Gopal used like a rope-climber and staggered into her room. They collapsed on her bed.

Before Gopal could struggle upright she was all over him. He plunged back and closed his eyes as he felt her lips and teeth on his neck. A red curtain undulated behind his eyes. Slowly the earth began to heave. Even in his drunken state Gopal sensed that the earth was scheduled to heave much later. Besides which he could only dimly feel where she was now on some extremity of his body, much less be aroused by her.

He felt himself begin to surge like the sea. The alcohol began to rise and fall in his veins like black waves in a storm. He felt as though his body was going up and down on crests and troughs, as though he was immersed in an ocean. I am feeling seasick, his mind gasped. He began to sweat as he lowered internal sluice gates against torrents of sickness. But the bile rose further and further with each attack, until with overwhelming force it flung aside his restraints and poured out in a gush of vomit.

The two nights of drinking, the junk food, the excitement and the despair, the worry, the most recent binge, all came pouring out till he felt his guts would come out through his throat too.

He had still retained enough awareness to turn his face away from where the girl was, so she was more concerned than angry.

'Aw gee, I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were sick, aw gee,' she apologised, rubbing Gopal's chest with a soothing circular motion.

'Okay, take it easy. You'll feel much better now.' She stroked the panting

Gopal's sweaty head. The hair oil was melting but she carried on patting him.

Gopal's breathing eased. His chest began to feel cool. His brain, which had felt as if it was trying to emerge through his eyes and ears, fell back into place. The rest of his insides began to settle down. His ears stopped singing. Cautiously he waited until the feeling of well-being became a slightly permanent one. Then he began to feel embarrassed.

'I will help in cleaning,' he told the girl, pushing her away.

He tried to get up. To his shock the same feeling of rising and falling, making his head swim, making him feel seasick again, came over him. He tried to push himself up and felt himself sucked back as though he was lying in quicksand.

He felt the girl take his hand and pull him to his feet. He turned to look at the bed and he thought he was reeling because the bedcover was undulating towards him as though it intended to capture him and drag him back to its depths.

Gopal staggered back in alarm. The girl put a supporting arm around him.

'Whoa there,' she said kindly. 'It's only a water bed.'

Everything suddenly became clear to Gopal. He had heard of these depraved inventions before. His sense of being underwater, his feeling of seasickness, all became understandable. He was even able to look at the device with cautious curiosity, though it was hard to believe that it wasn't alive, a large, round, protoplasm, quivering hungrily for its prey.

Now he could smell the vomit and his own bitter taste.

'Clean up,' he suggested again.

'Nah, that's okay. No big deal. I'll take care of it,' the girl reassured him with exaggerated casualness, probably relieved that he wasn't dying in her room. 'Want me to drop you someplace?'

'I am staying near college.'

'Well, if you're ready to move, let's go. You want some coffee or something?'

'No, no,' said Gopal, heading out.

All the way to his apartment he kept quiet, his face averted from her so that she wouldn't have to breathe his smells. Embarrassment made him vibrate like, he thought, the water bed. Since nothing could really condone his behaviour, he decided against saying anything at all. He felt as though he was no longer a man. He felt disgraced, as low as the vomit he had left behind.

He began to worry if the girl and he knew anyone in common and if news

of his traumatic failure might get to the college. He began to wonder how best to protect himself. At least she didn't know his name, he thought with relief, so the chances of her pinpointing him as an embarrassment and failure were remote.

In a friendly, reassuring voice she asked, 'And where're you from?'

Gopal's mind raced like a rat. All could be lost here. 'From Pakistan.'

'Aw gee, that's great. And I've forgotten your name.'

Gopal struggled with himself. 'Myself is Abdul.'

They had arrived at the campus.

'I am getting off at corner here,' said Gopal.

'That's okay. I'll drop you to your place.'

'I am staying in men's dorm. They are not allowing visitors at night.' Gopal was astonished but pleased at his fluent lies.

'Oh okay,' she pulled over. 'Maybe we can get together sometime, huh?'

'Certainly. But I am returning to Pakistan next week.'

'Aw gee, that's a real pity. Well, take care now. By the way, my name's Cindy.'

They shook hands in greeting and farewell, but briefly. Gopal got out and watched her car till it had disappeared, to make sure she couldn't see which way he was going. Then he tramped home.

When he got there he found a sealed envelope taped to his door, saying 'To Gopal, from Sue.' He tore it up unread and tossed the scraps over the rails. He watched them flo

'Swedish Massage,' it read. 'Your favourite massage by our lovely and trained girls expert in fulfilling your every fantasy. Come one come all.'

Gopal grimaced at the last phrase. He began to feel less full of self-pity. It would be better than an evening at home alone. And what a story he would have to tell Randy when he returned. He could casually inform him that he had managed the deed all by himself without any of Randy's help, thank you. And then of course the details. And what details there would be!

To his surprise Gopal found he was already in the parking lot. Cautiously he looked around and then surreptitiously read the message again. A map gave instructions on how to get there and Gopal tried to figure out which bus, if any, went in that direction. Finally he gave up and decided to walk.

It was dark now and he supposed it was cold, though he didn't seem to be able to feel it. He turned away from the main road and following the map's directions went into quiet residential streets. The houses were ablaze with

Christmas Eve decorations, but Gopal hardly gave them a thought.

He felt energetic, excited and purposeful. He tried not to think of the house ahead, but his mind told him it was high time he fulfilled, he thought piously, Randy's ambition. They were bound to be nice girls, he assured himself, from good families who had fallen upon hard times. He would be gentle with whichever one he selected, he decided. He thought she would have blond hair and skin whose freshness leapt like the wind. Maybe she would weep a little, he thought, his mind muddled as he took the last turn and walked down the quiet lane. Would his mother like her? He was already a little in love with her. She would look something like Brooke Shields.

The street became darker. At the end of the lane he saw the dim glow of a house. He walked up to it and rang the bell. There were red curtains on the windows which had bars on them. He rang the bell again and it clanged loudly. The door opened and a woman looked out. He could see the chain still holding the door.

'Yeah?' she asked.

Now that he was here Gopal was abashed. The excitement abruptly vanished and he nearly fled. He rustled the leaflet.

'Got it at the mall,' he muttered.

'You want a massage?'

Gopal nodded. The door closed. This was his chance to run. He stepped back and the door opened again. He rushed forward before he changed his mind. The door shut behind him with many clicks and he felt relieved. If there were any ghosts pursuing him in the dark they would have to sit outside.

The woman was extremely plump and wore a shiny blue dress.

'You wanna sit?' she asked.

Gopal saw two rooms on either side with some sort of ornate upholstery on the furniture, but he sat on a plain chair in the hall at the foot of the stairs. The rooms upstairs, he thought, must be where the girls were.

'Sorry for the delay,' the woman apologised mechanically, seating herself behind a table, 'but I've only got one girl working tonight and she's busy with a client right now. What with Christmas Eve I suppose I'm lucky to have anyone at all.'

'Yes, yes,' said Gopal sympathising completely with the problem of finding good help these days.

'The other one just upped and left. Just like that,' the woman snapped her

fingers, livening up at a responsive audience.

'Terrible,' Gopal commiserated, hoping to ingratiate himself with her.

'Say,' she asked curiously, 'where you from?'

'India,' Gopal responded at once. 'Very poor country,' he added, hoping it would induce her to lower the rates. 'Ah,' he cleared his throat, 'how much?'

'Depends what you want.'

Gopal thought about this. 'Meaning?'

'Well there's $45 for the Delux, that's for half an hour. $60 for the Super Deluxe, that's for 45 minutes. And $75 for the Harem Special. That's for 90 minutes.'

'I will have,' Gopal salivated, 'Harem Special.'

'Cash in advance.'

Gopal reached into his pocket. The genes of generations of Jajau's most fierce bargainers held him back, even at this delicate moment.

'Any student discount?' he asked.

'Sorry.' She was firm.

'I have many friends,' Gopal hinted.

She paused. 'Well,' she decided, 'not this time. But anytime you bring five or more people maybe we can work something out.'

Capitulating, Gopal counted out the money.

'Margie,' the lady yelled up the stairs. 'There's another gentleman here who wants a date with you. Hurry up. You haven't got all day.'

In a while there were sounds upstairs and a short, balding young man came hurriedly down the stairs. Gopal brushed past him as he climbed up. Behind him he heard the door open and close for the small man. He went up the stairs with trepidation.

There was a door on either side at the top, but the one on the left was ajar. He pushed it open with hands that trembled like mice. The room was empty but he could hear water running behind a closed door. He stepped in cautiously and shut the door. The room was almost totally bare except for a metal table with a rubber sheet on it. Gopal thought it looked like an operating room except for the picture of Madonna in her underwear on the wall and red curtains on the window. A small table near the metal platform held bottles and vials of liquids.

Gopal found he had stopped breathing. He wished the room had been a little cosier for such a historic moment, but no doubt the girl would make up by her warmth. The bathroom door opened and Gopal looked swiftly and

looked away. His first thought was that she didn't look like Brooke Shields. His second was that she had stringy brown hair, wore a blue bikini, was thin and short and her face wore a look that would have been vulnerable if she hadn't hardened it. She was pretty in a wan way. His third thought was that she looked familiar.

He looked again and saw the same spark of recognition in her eyes before she turned away. He recognised her as a girl he had seen on campus. He hesitated wondering if the deal was off.

She handed him a towel. You can wear this.'

Gopal took it and went into the bathroom and got out of his clothes. In a way he felt better that she wasn't a total stranger. He could even remember sitting at the table next to hers one lunchtime in the cafeteria. He wrapped the towel around his waist, sucked in his stomach, flexed his muscles and swaggered out.

She was squeezing some lotion onto her palm. 'Lie down,' she motioned listlessly.

Careful to keep himself covered, Gopal lay down on his back.

'Turn over,' she commanded.

Gopal flipped around and he felt her pour some liquid onto his back before starting to knead and pummel him. Gopal lay passively for a while, enjoying her small yet firm hands rhythmically working their way over his shoulders. Let her get used to me, he thought.

'How much time you got?' she asked.

'Harem Special.' His voice was muffled.

He lay still for a while longer and then turned around and looked at her directly.

'How much for more?' he asked.

She kneaded his chest. 'Harem Special's the best we got.' Her voice was non-committal.

Gopal turned around and wondered how to broach the subject more effectively. He decided on subtlety. When he felt her hands leave him and go back to the lotions, he turned around and dropped the towel to the floor.

Your towel's fallen,' she said tonelessly, picking it up and putting it on his groin.

As she started kneading his thighs, Gopal caught her hand.

'I'll scream,' she said listlessly. 'We've got bouncers in the house.'

Gopal let go and closed his eyes. This is ridiculous, he thought.

'What you are wanting?' he asked.

'A good night's rest.'

Gopal turned over again. Nothing like this had ever occurred in either *Deep Throat* or *Penthouse Letters.* In fact he had gathered from these two major reference works that the chief problem faced by males in America was fighting off females. And here he was even paying one and still failing to succeed. Maybe she's new and shy, he thought. Perhaps he needed to gently woo her.

You are doing anything at all?' he asked.

'Just Swedish massage.' Her voice sounded like it had fallen asleep while her hands continued fluttering like headless chickens.

Gopal caught both her hands this time.

'Not even touching me? I am paying $75 already.' His voice pleaded yet was angry

'I'll call the cops. That's prostitution.' Her monotone was unchanged. 'This buzzer on the floor connects to the cop station. We've got protection.'

She waited tiredly, her eyes downcast, making no effort to free herself. Her exhausted passivity disgusted Gopal. He turned again on his stomach and lay there viciously. When she said 'Time's up,' he checked his watch.

'Twenty-five minutes more. Keep on,' he demanded savagely.

Wordlessly she continued.

Half an hour later Gopal came storming down the stairs, glowing with health and fury. He flung himself out of the door and raged off in the general direction of his apartment. Some homing instinct guided him because his mind was busy seething. No actual thoughts formed, just a wild fury.

He didn't know how long it took, but abruptly he was at the complex. He took the stairs as though in a single stride. An envelope was taped to his door with Gloria's scrawl on it, probably containing a Christmas poem. Gopal opened the envelope, tore up the single sheet inside unread and put it in his mouth and chewed it.

He raged to the fridge, pulled out a beer, took out the thoroughly masticated letter and threw it into the garbage can. He started to drink furiously. He put on the television and paced up and down, snorting at the beer. 75 dollars, he boiled.

He went back for another beer, pulled out the half-filled plastic garbage bag, knotted it and flung himself out of the room dragging it behind him. As he came down the stairs, Gloria's door opened and she tip-toed out,

beckoning to him. She shut the door softly behind her. Gopal walked to her warily.

'Sorry,' she twinkled sweetly.

'Huh?' Gopal growled.

'Didn't you read my letter? I put it on your door.'

Gopal muttered incomprehensibly.

'Well I've met this nice boy Troy that I used to know earlier and he's moved in with me. So I guess our thing's over. Sorry.' She dimpled her fingers at him and left.

'Our thing!' Gopal bared his fangs at her retreating back.

He dragged the garbage sack towards the rear where the garbage bin was kept. On an impulse he raced back and flung the sack at Gloria's door.

Even her, he thought in disbelieving fury. Even her. He whirled around and raced up and down the car park area. I will get married, he thought in wild rage. That will show everyone.

He ran towards the hedge to propose marriage to Sue. He rounded it and skidded to a stop. The same two seater car was parked there and all the lights were out in Sue's house.

Gopal lifted his face to the moon and howled.

The next few days were among the most miserable of Gopal's life. Lonely, hurting, with no one to turn to, he was reduced to calling Anand in desperation. He heard the phone ring and the whirr of the answering machine. 'Hi there -' Gopal slammed the phone down.

With nothing better to do, he took to wandering around the streets, despite the slush and snow. One afternoon he found himself in an unfamiliar road and spotted a shack announcing 'XXX movies. Gadgets. Novelties. Sex aids.' Intrigued, he walked in.

The bell over the door jangled and the man behind the counter looked up. He nodded pleasantly and Gopal relaxed. He was always worried when entering a bar or any other place he thought of as sinful, in case the people there demanded to know what he was doing in such a dreadful place and threw him out. He also nursed a persistent dread that his grandmother would suddenly come hobbling into sight. He appreciated that this was an unrealistic fear since there was very little chance of encountering his grandmother in a porno store in Eversville, particularly since she had never been outside India and now could hardly walk. But she seemed present in spirit on this as on many such occasions, peering over his shoulder at the sex

aids and muttering holy songs.

There was no one else in the store and Gopal browsed through the goods, though gaped through them might be a more accurate description. There were all manner of gadgets, many of them of such shape, size and dimension, that it boggled the mind trying to imagine someone putting them to use. Looking at them closely, Gopal felt sceptical at anyone actually using whips, chains, masks, sticks with bumps on them and other implements to which he felt embarrassed at even trying to put a name. Maybe they are just meant for displaying in homes, he speculated. The Yanks were quite capable of it. He tried to imagine the Dean's living room with one of these things on the centre table, while the Dean's wife tried to pass it off as the tusk of an African elephant.

He drifted to the books section and browsed through the magazines. He had seen many of them already, but not so many together. He found that several specialised in particular areas. One was called *Mamas with Mammoth Mammaries.* It was a monthly publication. Others were so explicit that Gopal felt that they were no longer pornography, but were more accurately gynaecology.

He drifted back to the counter and the man behind it, thin, bearded and long-haired, joined his palms together and bowed a 'namaste', the Indian greeting. Gopal, amidst these exotic surroundings, couldn't believe his eyes. Must be having backache or something, he told himself.

The man spoke clearly, 'Namaste.'

Gopal wondered if he was going mad. I am hearing things, he told himself firmly.

'Namaste, sahib,' the man insisted.

Gopal had to admit that the man was saying something.

'Hello there,' he boomed.

'Namaste,' the man repeated; translating, 'I salute the divine in thee.'

'Namaste,' replied Gopal reluctantly, wondering if the spirit of his grandmother had somehow entered into the man.

'I knew it. One look and I said "Here's an Indian."'

Gopal wondered if his Pakistani story would sell here. 'How you are knowing?'

'Spent a year there. Goa, Varanasi, Kathmandu. I seen it all.'

'Very nice,' admired Gopal trying not to look at the shop's wares.

'I'm Tom,' the man stuck out his hand over the counter.

'I'm, I'm,' Gopal groped, till struck with a happy inspiration. 'I'm Anand. My friends are calling me Andy,'

'Namaste, Anand,' the man folded his hands again, 'where's home in India for you?'

'Oh, my home,' Gopal fumbled, 'Madras.' This was some 2000 miles from his house.

'Gee, that's great. I just loved India. I can't wait to go back. Matter of fact I'm planning a trip again next year. Say, why don't you give me your address and maybe we could meet up in India? What d'you say?'

'Most certainly, yes, yes,' burst Gopal enthusiastically, paling visibly at the thought.

He hastily concocted an address for Tom who wrote it down.

'So tell me,' encouraged Tom, 'what d'you like here?' He was clearly touched by Gopal parting with his address. 'Look around, go ahead. Think of it as your own store.'

Gopal winced.

Tom came out from behind the counter to help Gopal regard it as his own store. "Take what you like,' he urged. 'Anything for a friend from India. Maybe something for the family back home?' he asked helpfully.

He began to pluck a gadget here and a thingummy there, like a friendly grocer among his vegetables, before heaping them all into a cardboard box. 'Feel free,' he urged. 'How about one of these inflatable dolls for those winter nights, huh? See, you just blow into this and she swells up nice and good. See?'

To Gopal's horror it began to inflate to female proportions down to the last anatomical detail.

'And then you just remove this stopper and she goes right back into her bag.' The doll deflated with a hiss.

'So how about that, huh?' boasted Tom. 'Take it, take it. A little free something from America for the family. Bet it'll crack them up.'

Gopal didn't doubt it.

'But you will have trouble,' Gopal protested at the door, carrying the bag of horrors.

'No problem. Hey, no problem,' Tom assured him. 'I can handle it. I'll say we got robbed. I'm planning to leave in any case.'

They were outside now and Gopal couldn't wait for Tom to go back so that he could throw away the box. But Tom was clearly intent on playing the good

host. He stood outside waving.

'Hey,' he yelled, 'where's your car? Want me to give you a ride?'

Gopal stumbled in fright. 'No, no, just around corner. Bye.'

'Namaste. See you in India.'

Gopal hastened around the corner struggling with the box. He dumped it on the sidewalk the instant Tom was out of sight, shuddering. He wiped his hands on his trouser, feeling them unclean.

'Hey!' said a gruff voice near by and with a start Gopal saw a man who had been raking leaves.

You want to pick that up?' He pointed to the box.

Without a moment's pause, Gopal sprinted down the road, the man's outraged cries receding behind him.

Sitting safely in his apartment, he wondered what the man would make of the varied contents of the box. But since he lived so close to the shop, perhaps he was used to finding strange objects growing like unusual mushrooms on his lawns. What must his life be like, mused Gopal, never knowing what the dog was going to dig up and drag back home? And supposing he had small children. How did he explain humming bananas to their enquiring minds. And what about the people who actually made the gadgets, what did they say to their children when they came home?

'What did you do today at the office, Daddy?'

'Oh I made eleven dildoes, son.'

'Gee whiz Dad!'

Gopal's mind had begun to race. How about the actors in pornographic films, what did they say to their wives in the evening?

'Have a hard day at work, dear.'

'Whew, Betty, you can say that again. Fourteen retakes of an orgasm scene and a homosexual orgy.'

'Poor dear. Here, have a nice refreshing aphrodisiac.'

And did such a couple celebrate their wedding anniversary by refraining from sex?

Gopal could have carried on in this unhealthy vein if the phone hadn't politely burred, seeking his attention. He picked it up.

'Herb's abortion parlour,' he chortled, 'you are raping them and we are scraping them.'

He guffawed at his witty imitation of a receptionist he had overheard in the Science Building.

There was a silence at the other end.

'Very nice, Gopal,' came the dry voice of the Dean. 'I see the Wolff educational system has been at least as successful as ours.'

'Oh no, no, no,' protesed an abashed Gopal. 'Randy is not saying anything.' He tried to defend his friend accused wrongly for once.

'I'm sure,' said the Dean ironically. 'Well anyway, we're having a New Year's Eve dinner tonight for our friends and I wondered if you would like to join us?'

'Oh yes, sir, yes, yes,' accepted Gopal, extremely touched and pleased.

'I know it's a little late, but it just occurred to me that you might be feeling a little left out of things at this time of the year. So I thought I'd check.'

'Very kind of you and things like that,' mumbled Gopal awkwardly. 'I will certainly be very happy.'

'Great. I'll call Dr Love and ask him to give you a ride. He lives in your complex. Is around eight okay?'

'Very good, sir. Certainly.'

Gopal hadn't known that Dr Love lived in such proximity. He was a chemistry professor and though Gopal thought highly of his professional abilities, he also felt that he looked like a camel. He was tall and supercilious and he hunched a little. When he walked there was a bounce in his step exactly like a camel's, making Gopal want to leap upon his shoulders, whip his posterior and make clucking sounds. Of course he never revealed his dark desires to Dr Love, but greeted him with decorously downcast eyes.

When the bell rang at eight, Gopal was bathed, cologned and oiled. (His mother had packed enough to last a year, plus little more for emergencies.) Dr Love stood towering at the door, his lips parted in an unfamiliar grin.

'Ready?' he asked.

He loped down the corridor, Gopal following, trying to surreptitiously imitate his bouncing gait.

They got into the car and drove off.

'And so,' said Dr Love, clearly making polite conversation, 'how do you love America?'

Gopal glared at him and decided to answer with some chemistry problems. This eased the atmosphere considerably and they managed to get to the Dean's place without mishap.

The house, Gopal saw with surprise, was in one of the more expensive parts of town and was a large, double-storeyed structure fronted by a long,

well-kept lawn. Gopal had always thought that teachers were very poorly paid and lived in the American equivalent of hovels. But clearly he had been wrong. His professors rose in his estimation. They parked in the driveway behind a few cars. Some people seemed to have already arrived.

Dr Love rang the bell and it was opened by a lady who was apparently the Dean's wife. Gopal examined her as she and Dr Love kisatm